AFTER THE BATTLE

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BATTLE FOR COLOGNE

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Front Cover: *Top:* Cologne, March 6, 1945: a Sherman of the US 3rd Armored Division is hit by a shell fired by a Panther tank from the cathedral square further down the street in the final stages of the battle for the city. (IWM) *Bottom:* The same spot in Komödien-Strasse today. (Karel Margry)

Centre Pages: Comparison in colour. *Left:* Two American radio commentators, Cesar Searchinger of NBC and Quincy Howe of CBS, inspect the Panther tank knocked out in front of the Cologne cathedral (see pages 22-26) during their tour of the Western Front, April 10, 1945. (USNA) *Right:* Cologne, March 1999. (Karel Margry)

Back Cover: Tribute to a former enemy by the Royal British Legion as the remains of Oberfeldwebel Heinrich Richter are laid to rest in a British cemetery in October 1998. (S. McMillan)

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IWM — Imperial War Museum, London
USNA — US National Archives

Cologne, the great Rhineland city with a history dating back to Roman times, suffered badly in the Second World War. Three years of continuous and heavy Allied bomber attacks had reduced large tracts of the city to ruins and caused some 90 per cent of its 450,000 inhabitants to flee the city. Though by 1945 the city was really not much more than an empty shell, its capture was seen as an event of major importance by the Western Allies. After Aachen (see *After the Battle* No. 42) it was the second historic German city to be assaulted by the US First Army. *Right:* This aerial shot was taken on April 24, 1945, after the battle for the city was over. Amid a sea of ruins, the famous Dom cathedral rises majestically. On the left is the bomb-shattered Cologne Hauptbahnhof (central railway station) and lying destroyed in the Rhine are (L-R) the Hohenzollern road and rail bridge, the Hindenburg suspension bridge, and (in the distance upstream) the Köln-Süd rail bridge (see *After the Battle* No. 73). (USNA)

To combat rebellious actions by foreign workers, and also to scare the city population into holding on, on October 25, 1944, the Cologne Gestapo publicly hanged 11 foreign slave labourers in Hütten-Strasse. On November 10, 13 others, some of them teenagers arrested for anti-Nazi resistance activities, were hanged on the same spot. (HASK)

The gallows were set up in front of the workshops underneath the railway embankment. Today, a memorial plaque, unveiled in May 1972, records where the executions took place. In 1982, the street was renamed Bartholomäus-Schink-Strasse after one of the young resisters executed (Schink was 16 years old when he died).

THE BATTLE FOR COLOGNE

By Karel Margry

Cologne, the great and historic Rhine city, in the fifth year of the Second World War was only a dark shadow of its former self. Germany's fourth-largest city, capital of the Rhineland, world-famous for its Gothic Dom cathedral, a modern town and great industrial centre, was by the beginning of 1945 a desolate and depressing place. Five years of aerial attacks by British and American bombers had turned the once-lively metropolis into a wasteland of ruins, a wide expanse of debris almost empty of people.

The first raid on the city — by the RAF on the night of May 15/16, 1940 — had been followed by countless more. One of the worst attacks had been that of the night of May 30/31, 1942, when — in what was Bomber Command's first '1,000-bomber raid' — some 1,047 aircraft had dropped 1,455 tons of incendiaries and high-explosive on the city, which destroyed or damaged nearly 13,000 buildings, killed 469 people, injured 5,027 and made some 45,000 homeless. It was estimated that between 135,000 and 150,000 of Cologne's population of 700,000 fled the city after this raid.

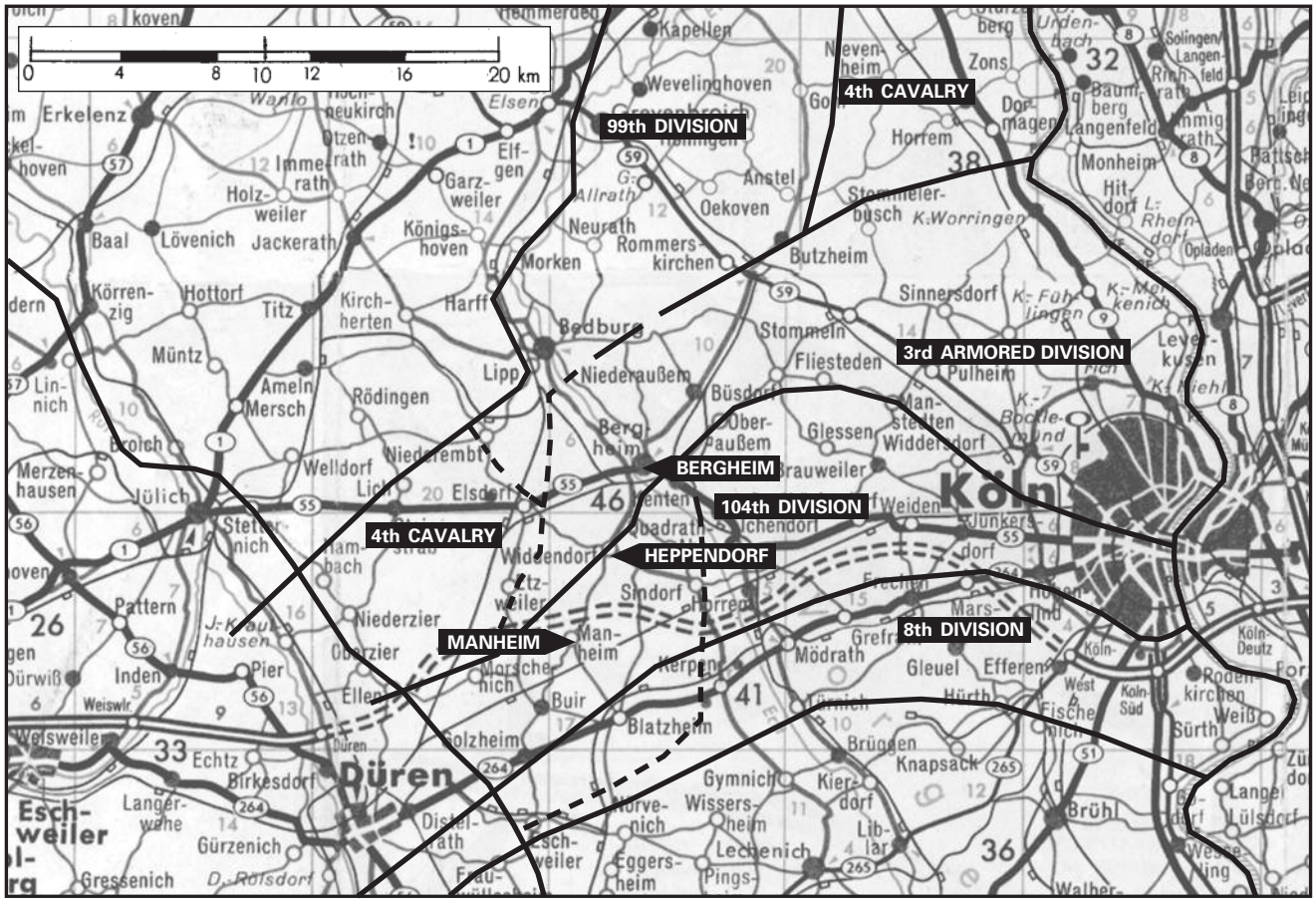
After the US Eighth Air Force joined the air offensive in August 1942 (their first mission to a target in Germany occurring in January 1943), the Americans bombed the city by day and the British by night. The worst raid of the whole war was that of June 28/29, 1943, when bombs from 608 RAF aircraft destroyed or damaged some 21,000 buildings, killed 4,377 persons, injured another 10,000 and made 230,000 homeless. Two particularly heavy day attacks on October 14-15, 1944 (one of which destroyed the city's Mülheimer Bridge) led the NSDAP authorities to order all those not absolutely essential for the war industry to evacuate the city. In this second mass exodus the population shrank from 445,000 to 225,000. As the relentless bombing continued, more people fled death and destruction. By March 1945, only some 40,000 remained in the devastated city.

With whole areas reduced to rubble, a ghostly atmosphere hung in the city. Supply of gas, water and electricity had virtually stopped. To get water, people had to queue up at municipal water pumps or water carts. Most shops had closed, and the few still open supplied only the most essential of rationed foodstuffs. Telephone lines were erratic or dead, trams had stopped running. Theatres and cinemas were shut, pubs had closed down. Nights were spent in cellars or air raid bunkers. Small sections of the city's war industries still operated, but most factories had been bombed out of production. Their forced labourers — mostly Russians, Poles and Frenchmen — were now mainly used to clear up the street rubble.

Cologne's endless areas of bombed-out blocks hid a strange and unexpected variety of clandestine fugitives: Wehrmacht soldiers deserted from the front, escaped PoWs and slave labourers, German teenagers shying from Flak duty, enlistment in the Volkssturm (the Reich's last-ditch levy of old men and Hitler Youths) or trench-digging work. Individually or in groups these fugitives subsisted in the ruins, trying to hold out until war's end. Among those hiding in the rubble was even a loosely-organised resistance cell of teenagers operating under the name of 'Edelweiss-Piraten' who made attempts on the life of high-placed Nazis. Among those assassinated was an NSDAP-Ortsgruppenleiter (Nazi party town district chief). The city Gestapo, helped by police units and Hitler Youth, organised large-scale man-hunts to weed out the 'looters' and 'terrorist gangs'. On several occasions there erupted outright gun-battles between them and armed groups of fugitives. On November 26, 1944, the chief of the Cologne State Police, SS-Sturmbannführer Max Hoffmann, was killed in one such gunfight in the suburb of Klettenberg. In another, in the Grosser Griechenmarkt, the Gestapo used demolitions to smoke out a group of deserted Wehrmacht soldiers.

To scare the population into submission, the Gestapo, on orders of Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler, organised public hangings: on October 25, 11 slave workers (five Russians, one Croation and five men of unknown nationality) were hanged in Hütten-Strasse (in the district of Ehrenfeld), and on November 10 another 13 arrested youths met the same fate in the same street. Some 300 others, arrested and sentenced to death by a People's Court, were beheaded in the Klingelpütz Gestapo prison on Gereonswall.

Through it all, Nazi propaganda tried to uphold the morale of the local population. Top Nazi officials — like Gauleiter (NSDAP region chief) Josef Grohé and Kreisleiter (local chief) Richard Schaller — made calls for soldiers and civilians to defend the city to the last man. On October 4, 1944, Propaganda Minister (and newly-appointed Reich Plenipotentiary for Total War) Joseph Goebbels visited 'Frontstadt Köln' to deliver a fanatical 'hold-on' speech that was broadcast nationwide. Although there were still many persons ready to die for the Führer, most citizens of Cologne reacted cynically, craving only for a quick end to the war and the bombing. Such was the atmosphere in Cologne as the Allied armies planned to conquer the city in early 1945.



BATTLE FOR THE COLOGNE PLAIN

Cologne was the objective of the VII Corps of the US First Army. Before the city itself could be assaulted, the VII Corps had to conquer the Cologne plain which stretches to the west of the city between the Roer and Rhine rivers.

The campaign which led to the Allied capture of Cologne on March 7, 1945, began two weeks earlier, with the long-awaited and meticulously-prepared set-piece assault by the US First and Ninth Armies across the Roer river on February 23. Although the main effort of this assault was by Lieutenant General William H. Simpson's Ninth Army in the north, one corps of Lieutenant General Courtney H. Hodges' adjacent First Army had been assigned the responsibility for protecting the Ninth Army's right flank as far as the Rhine. Once this job was completed, that same corps was to take Cologne, then head south along the Rhine in order to converge with other First Army contingents pushing south-east to the Ahr river.

Between the Roer and the Rhine — a distance of 25 miles — lies the Cologne plain, generally flat open country traversed by an extensive road network. The terrain includes two natural military obstacles. Cutting diagonally across the plain is the Erft canal (actually a river and two parallel canals) which runs northwards to flow into the Rhine near Düsseldorf. And immediately behind the Erft lies a low, flat ridge, some 25 miles long, called the Vorgebirge. Direct access up its western slopes is obstructed by a series of big open-cast coal mines with cliff-like sides and abandoned, water-filled mine pits which in many places confine passage to the width of the roads. Here, factories and heavily-urbanised settlements abound. North-west of Cologne, the country is generally flat and pastoral, dotted with villages and small towns, particularly along the major highways radiating from Cologne.

The assignment to protect Ninth Army's flank and clear the Cologne plain fell to the US VII Corps of Lieutenant General J. Lawton Collins. The assault across the Roer would be done by two infantry divisions, the 104th Division (Major General Terry de la Mesa Allen) and the 8th Division (Major General William G. Weaver). Once a firm bridgehead had been established, the 3rd Armored Division (Major General Maurice Rose) would pass through and start out for the Erft. The 104th and 8th would follow behind and the 4th Cavalry Group (Colonel John C. MacDonald) would screen the armour's left flank. The 99th Division (Major General Walter E. Lauer) would be in reserve.

The Germans had long expected the assault across the Roer and had tried to prepare themselves as well as possible. Using a large foreign labour force, they had built three lines of defence: one hugging the east bank of the Roer, one halfway between the Roer and the Erft, and one behind the Erft.

In its drive to the Rhine and into Cologne, VII Corps would in turn meet elements from three different corps of General der Infanterie Gustav von Zangen's 15. Armee (which was just then in the process of exchanging headquarters with General der Panzertruppen Hasso von Manteuffel's 5. Panzer-Armee to its south). Opposing the Roer assault would be the LVIII. Panzerkorps of General der Panzertruppen Walter Krüger (shorn of

The push across the plain was spearheaded by the 3rd Armored Division. Although there were days when good advances were made, at times the armour met stiff resistance. Here, smoke pours from a Sherman hit by German artillery 'on the road to Cologne'. (USNA)

Most of the towns lying between the Roer river and the Erft canal — the major obstacle in the push to Cologne — were first entered by 3rd Armored spearheads and then properly cleaned out by the infantry divisions following behind them. Manheim, halfway between the Roer and Erft, was captured by the 83rd Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, assisted by Task Force Kane (of Combat Command A), early on the first day of the Cologne offensive, February 26. Later in the day, the 413th Infantry of the 104th Division arrived to mop up the town. Here, two men from the division's 329th Engineer Battalion walk through a log road-block at the western entrance to the village, a typical example of the barricades met in almost every town and village on the road to Cologne. Picture by Signal Corps photographer Tech/4 Leo B. Moran. (USNA)A)

the armour which its name implied, it had only the 353. Infanterie-Division and the 12. Volksgrenadier-Division). Then, as VII Corps wheeled north-east and crossed the Erft, it would meet Panzerkorps Bayerlein, an ad hoc formation led by Generalleutnant Fritz Bayerlein, which by then comprised what was left of the 9. and 11. Panzer-Divisions after their piecemeal and futile commitment against the Ninth Army further north. Finally, as VII Corps turned south-east towards Cologne, it would meet the LXXXI. Armeekorps of General der Infanterie Friedrich Köchling, consisting of the remnants of the 59. and 363. Infanterie-Divisions and the 3. Panzergrenadier-Division.

Cologne itself had been declared a fortress city by the commander of Wehrkreis (Military District) VI. Additional 88mm guns had been sent to reinforce the flak batteries around the city. Volkssturm units were ordered to construct tank barriers, which were constructed with trams and steel girders, on approach roads to the city, and to dig manholes and trenches in the park belt surrounding the inner city.

On February 23, VII Corps launched its assault across the Roer river at Düren. In a hard-fought action, the 104th and 8th Divisions gained a foothold on the eastern bank. By February 25, the two divisions, attacking day and night, had secured a bridgehead about five miles deep, anchored on the high ground from Oberzier in the north to Stockheim in the south. Now, the VII Corps was to debouch its armour, the intention being to send it north-eastward to seize crossings of the Erft.

Early on February 26th, the 3rd Armored Division — with the 13th Infantry Regiment (Colonel Numa Watson) of the 8th Division attached — launched five mobile task forces through the infantry lines. One of these forces was built around the light tanks and armoured cars of the 83rd Armored Reconnaissance Battalion (Colonel Prentice E. Yeomans), the other four were each made up of one tank battalion and one armoured infantry (or infantry) battalion plus a platoon of tank destroyers and engineers. On the left, Combat Command B (Brigadier General Truman E. Boudinot), with two such task forces, pushed towards the road centre of Elsdorf, while on the right Combat Command A (Brigadier General Doyle O. Hickey), also with two task forces, attacked astride the Düren—Cologne highway. The 83rd Armored Recon Battalion acted as a bridge between the two combat commands.

The secondary roads which the armour had to use were muddy from the winter thaw and rain, yet all five columns made good advances all day. The southernmost task force of CCA lost eight tanks to concealed German anti-tank guns at Blatzheim — a strong point in the German second line of defence — but apart from that the probing columns met only moderate resistance, and by the end of the day had advanced some five miles to the vicinity of Elsdorf and Berrendorf.

The next day, February 27, CCB needed most of the day to eject the 9. Panzer-Division from Elsdorf, four miles short of the Erft. The 83rd Armored Recon Battalion reached the river but found the bridges at Zieverich blown. CCA was held up by stubborn and well dug-in infantry of the 12. Volksgrenadier-Division at Kerpen, just west of the Erft. Thus faced with determined enemy opposition, General Rose decided to commit the division reserve, Combat Command R (Colonel Robert L. Howze), to force a crossing of the Erft. Passing through CCB in the north, CCR's two task forces reached the Erft at Glesch and Paffendorf where, after dark, infantrymen clambered over partially-broken bridges and waded across to establish two shallow bridgeheads.

Meanwhile, the corps' infantry divisions followed behind the 3rd Armored, mopping up enemy strong points bypassed by the tank spearheads. The 104th Division advanced with two regiments, the 413th Infantry (Colonel Welcome P. Waltz) on the left and the 414th Infantry (Colonel Anthony J. Touart) on the right, both regiments leapfrogging their battalions from town to town closely behind the armour. On the 26th, the 413th cleaned out Manheim and the 414th got as far as Buir. Masses of German civilians were wandering aimlessly within the operational zone, and civilian control was as much a problem as processing prisoners of war. By the afternoon of the 27th, both regiments had reached the Erft's west bank.

On the corps' south wing, the 8th Division (now commanded by Brigadier General Bryant E. Moore, after General Weaver had suffered another heart attack on the 25th) had a stiff fight for Nieder-Bolheim on the 26th, but less trouble clearing Blatzheim and Bergerhausen, which had been taken by the tanks. On the 27th, the 121st Infantry (Colonel Thomas J. Cross) helped the task force of 3rd Armored's CCA to capture Kerpen, but on the 28th the 8th Division closed up on the river too.

Repaired and still very much the same. Even the flagstaff holder on the right remains.

Left: **The following day, February 27, Task Force Kane reached Heppendorf, 11 miles west of Cologne. The 104th Division troops moving towards the town later that day met these German civilians evacuated from their homes and moving to the rear. The sign points to Etzweiler. (USNA)** *Right:* **The crossroads of the Heppendorf road with the B477 today.**

For the German defenders, hopes of holding the Erft line were dim. Back in Cologne, the anxious population could hear the distant rumble of artillery and guns come near. That day (February 28), another disaster occurred when the city's Hindenburg Bridge, weakened by bombing and overburdening, suddenly broke and collapsed into the Rhine, throwing throngs of refugees and soldiers, together with tanks, guns and vehicles, into the swollen river, causing untold casualties. With the Mülheimer Bridge already destroyed in October, and the newly-completed Rodenkirchen autobahn bridge and the Köln-Süd railway bridge broken by American bombs in January 1945, this left Cologne with only one intact Rhine bridge, the Hohenzollern (actually a cluster of a road bridge and two railway bridges).

Wanting to take advantage of the disorganisation on the German side, the VII Corps commander, General Collins, issued orders for the 3rd Armored to expand its foothold across the Erft, and for the 104th and 8th Divisions to widen the bridgehead by gaining additional crossings in their sectors. The coordinated assault by the 104th and 8th was to commence early on March 1.

February 28th was a difficult day for the 3rd Armored. The infantry in their two shallow bridgeheads on the Erft's east bank were under pressure from repeated counter-attacks. Heavy German artillery and mortar fire frustrated all attempts to put a bridge across at Glesch. At Paffendorf a treadway bridge was completed at 0945, just in time for armour to cross into the bridgehead and help repel another counter-attack. After dark, Luftwaffe planes doggedly attacked both bridge sites, causing light damage.

The situation eased up next day, March 1. Attacking before daylight, the 395th Infantry (Lieutenant Colonel James S. Gallagher) — attached to the 3rd Armored from the 99th Division — cleared the wooded high ground north and east of Bergheim and Kenten, collecting 150 prisoners, mostly from the 363. Volksgrenadier-Division. This finally took enemy observation off the Paffendorf bridge site and opened the road for the 3rd Armored tanks. The bridge at Glesch collapsed at noon, but another bridge had by then been completed at Zieverich.

That same morning, also at 0300 hours, after a preparatory artillery barrage, the 104th Division assaulted the Erft river and canals, crossing in assault boats at some points, splashing through the shallows on foot in others, and even swimming across in some places. On the left, the 413th Infantry captured a bridge across the main canal intact and took the twin-town area of Quadrath-Ichendorf, while the 414th Infantry (now led by Colonel Gerald C. Kelleher, Colonel Touart having been killed by a shell just before the assault) on the right seized the industrial city of Horrem. Counter-attacks were smashed by the divisional field artillery. By mid-afternoon, two Bailey bridges had been completed enabling tanks, tank destroyers and supporting weapons to cross.

In the 8th Division sector, the 121st Infantry met intense opposition that same morning as it tried to cross the Erft at Mödrath, which lies between the river and the canal. A local defence force, reinforced by stragglers from units of the LXXXI. Armeekorps, held them at bay until the 28th Infantry (Lieutenant Colonel Thomas H. Beck) stealthily crossed the Erft farther north during the night of March 1/2 and came in on the German flank. German resistance crumbled and by noon American engineers had put in a bridge, allowing support armour to cross. However, clearing up the town occupied the rest of the day.

By the end of March 1, despite frantic efforts by German planes, VII Corps had six Class 40 bridges in place across the Erft.

The primary task of VII Corps beyond the canal barrier was still to protect the Ninth Army's flank. That main attack was to be carried out by the 3rd Armored Division and the 99th Infantry Division. The armored division, still with the 8th Division's 13th Infantry and the 99th Division's 395th Infantry attached, was to break out of the Erft bridgehead, strike north to cut the Cologne—Mönchen-Gladbach highway at the town of Stommeln, thereby severing a vital artery leading into the Ninth Army's flank, then turn north-east to reach the Rhine at Worringen, eight miles downstream from Cologne.

Meanwhile, on the corps' northern wing, the 99th Division and the 4th Cavalry Group were to clear the ground between Rose's armoured thrust and the Erft, while on the corps' southern wing the 104th and 8th Infantry Divisions were to follow as best as possible, fighting their way through the coal-mining district in the direction of Cologne.

When the 3rd Armored attacked before daylight on March 2, all thrusts were successful, but they failed to precipitate immediate break-out. Conglomerate units of Korps Bayerlein, mainly from the 9. Panzer-Division, fought back stubbornly from behind anti-tank ditches and obstacles that made up an extension of the third defence line the Germans had prepared behind the Roer. By nightfall, the armour had expanded the Erft bridgehead to a depth of three miles, which carried it beyond the northern reaches of the Vorgebirge into open country. From that point onwards, the Germans would be capable only of delaying actions, almost always in towns and villages since the flat terrain afforded few military features. Conglomerate forces of Korps Bayerlein, usually including a few tanks or self-propelled guns, would have to gauge their defence carefully to keep from being overrun in one village lest there be nothing left to defend the next one.

On this day, March 2, with the Americans only seven miles from the city limits, the Allied air force carried out its last bombing raid of the war on Cologne. In clear weather and arriving in two waves shortly after 1000

All divisions of VII Corps had a difficult time establishing, or holding on to, bridgeheads across the Erft river and canal. One of the stiffest battles was fought around Bergheim, a small town overlooking the 3rd Armored's bridgeheads at Glesch and Paffendorf, which was finally cleared by the 395th Infantry of the 99th Division on March 1. Most of these prisoners belong to the 363. Volksgrenadier-Division. (USNA)

hours, 858 RAF aircraft — 531 Lancasters, 303 Halifaxes and 24 Mosquitos — released a carpet of bombs, mostly high-explosive, which stretched right across the main city on the west bank. With most of Cologne already in ruins, in many places the HE merely threw up existing heaps of rubble. However, the warning sirens had sounded only two minutes before the first bombs fell, and many people were caught in the open. Hundreds were killed, including at least 160 soldiers, and many military units were affected by the bombing. (In all, between 1940-45, Cologne suffered 262 air attacks. An estimated 20,000 people were killed from the air.)

The following day, March 3, the 3rd Armored continued its attack towards the Rhine. Moving before dawn, two task forces of CCA took the Germans by surprise in Büsdorf and Fliesteden, two villages south-west of Stommeln, annihilating the garrison and leaving nobody to defend the final village on the road to Stommeln, the division's intermediate objective. CCR moved against Stommeln from three sides and, despite an anti-tank minefield covered by anti-tank guns, converged on the town in late afternoon. Aided by P-47 air strikes, they cleared the last resistance by nightfall. Meanwhile, General Rose had sent a CCB task force beyond Stommeln to the village of Sinnersdorf, just four miles from the final objective of Worringen and the Rhine.

Meanwhile, the corps' infantry divisions had made comparable progress. On the left, the 99th Division, with the 4th Cavalry Group under command, had crossed the Erft near Glesch on March 2 and, skirting the canal, advanced north-east against light opposition. Next day, with the 395th Infantry returned from the 3rd Armored, the division swept east and cut the Cologne—Mönchen-Gladbach highway at several points.

On the corps' right, the 104th and 8th Divisions had made shorter but nevertheless telling gains. The 104th Division had used March 2 to prepare for the attack on the Vorgebirge which lay directly across its front. As the high ridge could not be assaulted frontally without heavy loss, because of the numerous coal pits and slag-heaps in front of it, the division planned to envelop the feature from the north. The plan worked like clockwork on March 3. First, the 413th Infantry followed the 3rd Armored, mopping up the remaining enemy resistance and clearing the northern part of the Vorgebirge. Next, passing through the 413th, the 415th Infantry (Colonel John H. Cochran) swept south across the wooded ridge, linking up with the 414th Infantry which had captured the high ground east of Horrem. By the end of the day, the 104th Division had crossed the crest of the Vorgebirge and cleared the big forest astride the Jülich—Cologne highway. It had made gains of up to four miles and captured 300 prisoners. From the eastern slopes of the Vorgebirge, the troops could see the famed twin spires of the Cologne cathedral, now only four miles away.

Further south, the 8th Division, advancing astride the Düren—Cologne highway, had a more difficult time on March 3. Bearing the additional responsibility of covering the open right flank of the VII Corps, the division had the slower going, but still took the second row of towns beyond the Erft — Habbelrath, Bottenbroich and Grefrath — and gained a firm hold on the western slopes of the Vorgebirge.

Even though the 3rd Armored Division still had several miles to go to reach the Rhine, the VII Corps commander, General Collins, now decided it was time to shift emphasis from the northward thrust to capturing Cologne. The 3rd Armored's advance had severely mangled Köchling's LXXXI. Armeekorps, leaving the Germans few troops with which to defend the city. On March 1, the Ninth Army had reached the Rhine at Neuss, so that any remaining enemy threat from that direction was minimal. Fighter pilots throughout the day had reported Germans scurrying across the Rhine on ferries and small craft, and more than 1,800 prisoners had entered VII Corps cages. Late on March 3, Collins told General Rose to continue to the Rhine at Worringen next day, but at the same time to divert a force south-east against Cologne.

Not waiting for a new day before continuing to the Rhine, in the early evening of March 3 patrols of the 83rd Reconnaissance Battalion determined that Roggendorf, the one town remaining short of Worringen on the Rhine, was stoutly defended. The battalion bypassed the town, in the process capturing an battery of 105mm guns and 300 surprised Germans, and before daylight a four-man patrol from the unit reached the Rhine north of Worringen (they were the first Americans of First Army to reach the river). Next morning, March 4, a task force of Combat Command B moved up the main road, and in conjunction with the 83rd cleared Roggendorf, repulsed a counter-attack by 200 infantry supported by five tanks, and drove on to Worringen and the river.

On the corps' left wing, the 99th Division and the 4th Cavalry Group advanced a good 12 miles on March 4, pushing back what was left of Korps Bayerlein. The 3rd Armored's thrust had split that corps in two, resulting in the paper transfer of the tattered 9. Panzer-Division to the LXXXI. Armeekorps, and leaving Bayerlein with only a Kampfgruppe of the 11. Panzer-Division and stragglers of the 59. Infanterie-Division. By the morning of March 4, Bayerlein held only a small bridgehead on the west bank at Dormagen, north of Worringen. Cut off from Cologne by the 3rd Armored's attack, he could no longer contribute to the defence of the city. On March 5, he finally received approval to pull back across the Rhine altogether, which he did that night.

Meanwhile, the 104th Division on March 4 had continued its advance towards Cologne. In the north, the 413th Infantry (now under Lieutenant Colonel William M. Summers) continued mopping up behind the 3rd Armored, advancing ten miles through the villages of Büsdorf, Fliesteden, Manstedten, Sinthern, and Geyen. In the centre, the 415th Infantry captured the bitterly-contested town of Brauweiler. As the advance was closing in on Cologne, resistance became more stubborn. In the south, the 414th Infantry launched a midnight attack on Königsdorf and Buschbell, two villages just east of the Vorgebirge, securing them by 0930 next morning. Two miles further east along the Düren—Cologne highway, the 414th converged with the 415th to attack the twin towns of Lövenich and Weiden. Throughout the afternoon of March 4, the Germans fought desperately with every weapon at their disposal, but by 2330 the localities were taken. The 104th Division was now only two miles distant from Cologne's city limits.

On the corps' south wing, the 8th Division on March 4 captured the mining town of Frechen, two miles south-west of Cologne, having fought a difficult passage across the narrow causeways which led between the coal-mine pits and into the heavily-defended town. The relatively slow progress of the 8th Division reflected not only the difficulties of attacking through the mining district, but also the fact that the division was striking the north flank of the LVIII. Panzerkorps.

The VII Corps' break-out from the Erft had by now severely mauled the LXXXI. Armeekorps. From his command post eight miles north of Cologne, General Köchling, early on March 4 had watched remnants of the 9. Panzer-Division being overrun by the American armoured spearheads. Forced to evacuate his CP, he had driven under fire several miles to Merkenich, on the outskirts of Cologne, where he found the commander of the 9. Panzer, Generalmajor Harald Freiherr von Elverfeldt, in the cellar of a brewery. Von Elverfeldt said his division was falling back towards the city in some order. By the early afternoon, Köchling had set up a new CP inside Cologne, in a bunker about one kilometre north of the Hohenzollern Bridge, and taken over command of the city itself. The city's former Kampfkommandant told him that the local situation was desperate: there were no forces or equipment to defend Cologne except a few Volkssturm troops. While they were talking, the NSDAP-Gauleiter, Josef Grohé, burst in and shouted; 'Cologne must be defended to the end. The Volkssturm can stop the American tanks with bazookas!' The military men watched in amazement as the civilian official went from one officer to another, pleading, demanding and finally threatening. Before he left, Grohé urged Köchling to move his CP, but the general refused.

The picture was taken on Neusser Strasse, the old road climbing out of Bergheim north-eastward in the direction of Niederaussem. Luckily for us the building with the characteristic roof-face in the right background remains to pinpoint the comparison.

The assault on Cologne proper began early on the morning of March 5, with the 3rd Armored Division attacking from the north-west and the 104th and 8th Divisions from the west. Here, tanks and infantry of Combat Command A of the 3rd Armored move down Venloer Strasse. The twin spires of the famous cathedral can vaguely be seen in the far distance above the roof of the big house. Tech/5 John W. Himes of the 165th Signal Corps Photo Company took this picture from the upstairs window of one of the gatehouses of the Jewish Cemetery on Venloer Strasse, which overlooks Cologne's Bocklemund tram terminal. The large building further down the road is the gate of the Westfriedhof cemetery. (USNA)

MARCH 5

By the morning of March 5, the 3rd Armored Division, 104th Division and 8th Division stood poised in a semi-circle around Cologne. Orders from General Collins directed the 3rd Armored and the 104th Division to close on Cologne, while the 8th Division was to strike for the west bank of the Rhine south of the city.

Collins had visited General Rose at his 3rd Armored command post, and found him confident that he could clear the city in a couple of days. Although it was against accepted doctrine as laid down in US Army manuals to send an armoured division into a big city like Cologne, both commanders agreed that the 3rd Armored had enough infantry available — its own 36th Armored Infantry Regiment and the attached 13th Infantry — and that German resistance was sufficiently reduced to warrant a deviation from the rules. Collins was relieved to find that, while sporadic resistance was still being encountered, it looked like the Germans did not intend 'to turn Cologne into a Stalingrad'. Collins made one decision that was not based on purely military considerations: acutely aware that the city's cathedral was a historical monument, he forbade that its twin towers be used for registration fire.

With Korps Bayerlein cut off from Cologne, the German defence of the city now depended solely on Köchling's LXXXI. Armeekorps, comprising the staffs and the few other remains of the 9. Panzer-Division, the 363. Volksgrenadier-Division and the 3. Panzergrenadier-Division. Köchling planned to use what was left of these units — the equivalent of two weak regiments — to defend an outer ring in the suburbs (based on the city's orbital road, the so-called Militärring), while policemen, firemen, and Volkssturm units were to fight from an inner ring deep within the city (based on the belt of parkland avenues around the old town, the so-called Grüngürtel).

Same window, same tram terminal. Pictured on a rainy morning in March 1999, courtesy of Frau Nys who today has an apartment in the cemetery gatehouse. The cathedral is these days hidden from view by the higher trees around the Westfriedhof.

One mile further on, where the railway viaduct crosses Venloer Strasse at the entrance to Cologne, the Germans had built a road-block of five trams, reinforced with steel girders dug into the ground. Himes pictured Jeeps of the 67th Armored Field Artillery Battalion (assigned to support CCA) and other 3rd Armored units sheltering under the viaduct in anticipation of the tramcars being removed. Cine film shot by a colleague of Himes shortly after shows engineers digging out the steelwork, the right-hand tram being pulled back by a Sherman, and other tanks squeezing through to continue the advance behind the infantry. (USNA)

The 3rd Armored Division's attack began at 0400 hours, while it was still dark, with Boudinot's Combat Command B on the left and Hickey's Combat Command A on the right. They faced the last remnants of the 9. Panzer-Division.

Opposition on the right was initially scattered and light. At 0710 hours, shortly after daylight, CCA's Task Force Doan (named after its commander, Colonel Leander L. Doan) entered Cologne through the northwest suburbs and was soon fighting through the Bickendorf area. They were the first Americans to enter the city.

House to house fighting developed but the Germans here defended with little spirit. The stiffest battle developed around the city airfield at Butzweilerhof where the Germans turned 16 stationary 88mm anti-aircraft guns against CCA. Task Force Kane (Lieutenant Colonel Matthew W. Kane) finally eliminated the guns in a cavalry-like charge, the tanks clattering forward across the flat terrain under cover of a smoke screen with the foot soldiers of 1st Battalion, 13th Infantry, riding on their decks. Almost all resistance by the 9. Panzer-Division collapsed a short while later when the division commander, Generalmajor von Elverfeldt, was killed.

On the left, CCB met more stubborn resistance which increased with proximity to the Rhine, where the Germans were still frantically ferrying as many troops as possible across to the far bank. Artillery and mortar fire from east of the river covered the withdrawal. In spite of the Germans' dogged delaying action, CCB's Task Force Welborn (Colonel John C. Welborn) took a number of towns on the outskirts and moved into the city only a short while after CCA had reported entry. In the factory area adjoining the river, Task Force Lovelady (Lieutenant Colonel William B. Lovelady) encountered massed 88mm guns and well dug-in infantry supported by self-propelled assault guns. One of the factories they cleared was the big Ford automobile works in Niehl.

Trams no longer pass underneath the viaduct, the line from Bocklemund today entering an underground tunnel just west of it. There are many similar-looking railway viaducts crossing thoroughfares in Cologne — Venloer Strasse alone has three.

Left: **Beyond the railway, adjoining Venloer Strasse to the north, lies the Bickendorf residential area. A column of 3rd Armored supply half-tracks pauses on Grüner Brunnenweg.**

Platanenweg on left. (USNA) *Right:* **No parking allowed on the pavement today. New housing blocks at the end of the street show that Bickendorf has grown since 1945.**

Sidestepping one road to the north, and advancing with the 3rd Armored's leading squad down that axis through Bickendorf, Himes came across these civilians hoisting the white flag of surrender outside their air-raid shelter on Sandweg. (USNA)

Heavy fighting continued throughout the day, the Germans using 88s, panzerfausts and small arms. The wreckage of the city hid many snipers. Each one had to be separately located and blasted out by the tanks or dug out of the ruins by the infantry. At one point, the defenders had made a road-block of five trams, reinforced by steel girders driven into the roadway. Engineers removed the obstacles and a Sherman pulled away the trams, enabling other tanks to continue the advance. By nightfall, the 3rd Armored had broken through the outer defence ring and pushed more than a mile into the city. They had reached the huge Reichsbahn marshalling yards and the train repair shops at Nippes, stopping just short of the German inner defence ring.

The 104th Division, to the right of the 3rd Armored, launched its assault at 0900 hours. From positions astride the Aachen—Cologne highway west of the city, the division lunged forward with Colonel Cochran's 415th Infantry on the left, the 414th Infantry of Colonel Kelleher on the right and Colonel Summers' 413th initially in reserve.

Between the division's start line at Widdersdorf and Lövenich and the first houses of Cologne lay some 3,000 yards of completely flat, wide open terrain, with hardly any cover. In the distance, rising beyond the dark line of the first buildings, loomed the cathedral spires.

With scouts leading, the infantrymen moved out in a staggered line across the open fields, with supporting armour following down the tree-lined highway. Any second, the tense GIs expected the enemy to open up on them. The odd sniper and machine gun did begin firing, but the main danger came from 88mm guns which fired fused shells that burst 100 feet up in the air, showering the troops below with white-hot splinters. Piper Cub light observation planes of the division artillery flew overhead trying to spot the location of the enemy batteries.

The 104th Division broke into Cologne at 0923, two hours later than the 3rd Armored. The first to cross the city limits was a squad of the 2nd Platoon of Company L, 3rd Battalion, 414th Infantry, led by Staff Sergeant Fred Hoover. They entered the suburb of Junkersdorf where, despite the years of bombing, the houses were still in excellent condition. White flags hung from the windows. Having emerged from their cellars, groups of civilians stood by. Most of them just sullenly watched the Americans approach but, to the GIs' utter amazement, here as elsewhere in Cologne many citizens appeared to greet them, not as conquerors, but almost as if they were liberators. Here and there, a civilian even stepped forward to warn of a minefield by the side of the road. Other civilians, clutching their few remaining possessions in their arms or pushing what they had left along in prams and hand carts, set out for the American rear lines. The growing numbers of refugees were rounded up and directed to collection points.

Above: **Further down the same street, at the point where Sandweg becomes Subbelrather Strasse, the advancing GIs meet civilians surrendering under a white flag. (USNA)** *Below:* **Looking east from the crossroads of Subbelrather Strasse and Rochus-Strasse today.**

The same bunker still stands today. With windows cut into its thick concrete walls, it is used as a housing block.

Above: **On the night of March 5/6, a lucky German artillery shell hit an ammunition truck in Am Haselbusch in Bickendorf causing other ammunition and fuel trucks in the confined street to blow up as well. Tech/5 Himes pictured the damage next morning. (USNA)** *Below:* **Damage to Nos. 10-12 has been invisibly repaired. Comparison taken from the second-floor staircase of No. 11 opposite.**

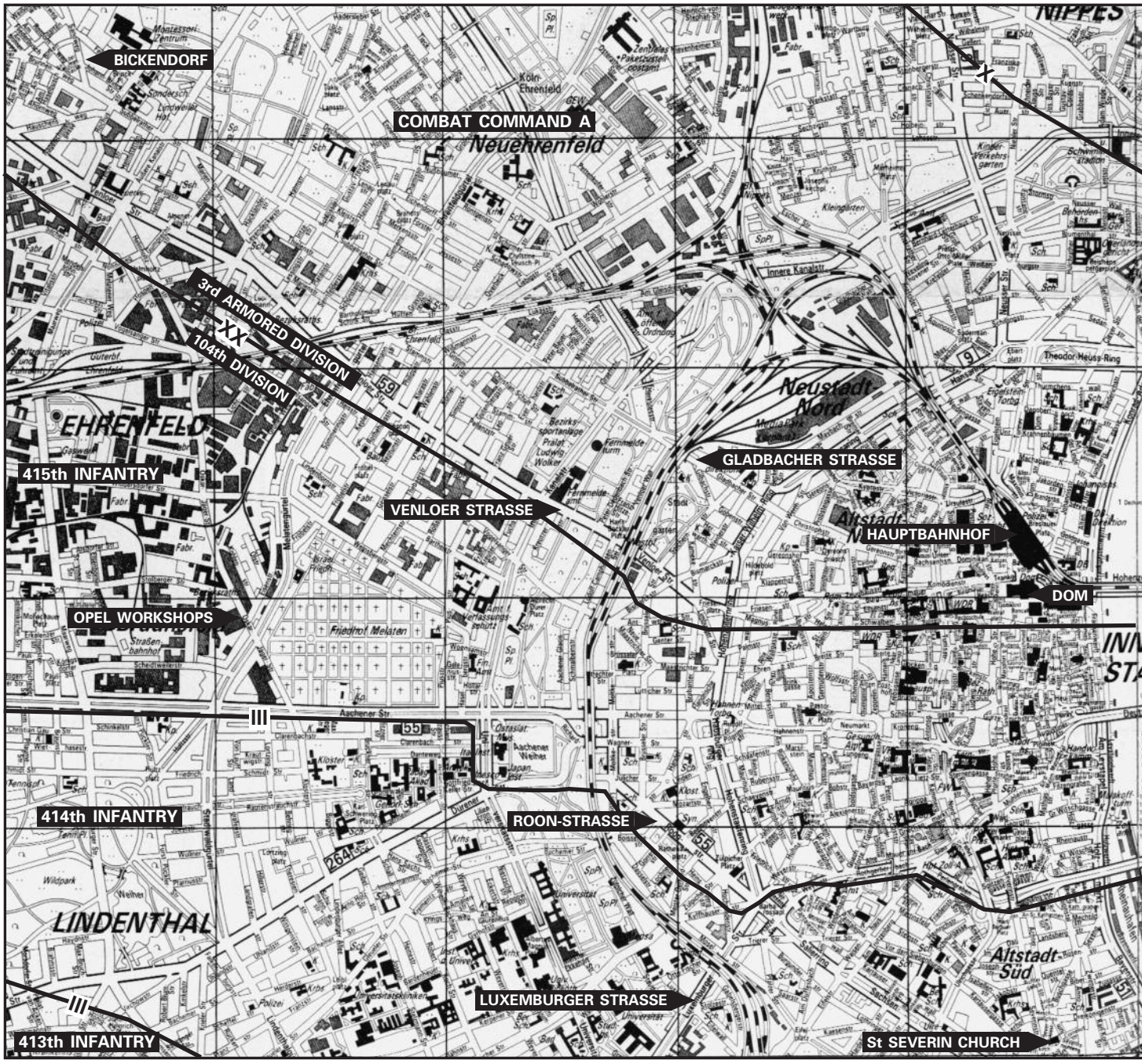
While the 3rd Battalion of the 414th Infantry mopped up Junkersdorf and the large Müngersdorf sports stadium, the 1st Battalion on the right cleared up a large barracks and the outer residential section of Lindenthal. Further north, the 415th Infantry, with the 1st Battalion on the right and the 2nd Battalion on the left, steadily advanced against scattered resistance, neutralising the large residential area of Müngersdorf and the factories in its path. The main enemy force had withdrawn to the middle of the city, and stragglers were quickly rounded up. By 2100, the 104th Division had pushed into the city some 4,000 yards.

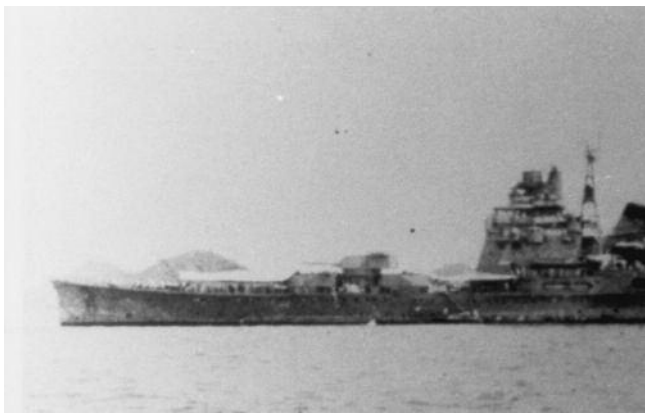
Moving into houses and buildings, the troops settled in for the night. Telephone wires were laid out to the rear, and patrols sent out through the dark streets to contact friendly elements left and right. Meanwhile, the GIs dined themselves on food and wine found in the houses. Between guard shifts, most men managed a few winks of sleep.

In the south, the 8th Division had begun its drive towards the Rhine well before dawn. Attacking under searchlights after a heavy artillery preparation, the 121st Infantry seized the towns of Gleuel and Horbell, moving on to take Sielsdorf and Burbach, then Stotzheim and Hermülheim. Each locality was fiercely defended by German infantry supported by tanks and self-propelled guns. As evening approached on the 5th, the First Army commander, General Hodges, shifted the southern border of the VII Corps to the south-east to provide room for the 8th Division to drive to the Rhine south of Cologne and cut the enemy's last landward escape route.

March 5 had been a day of disintegration and chaos on the German side. During the morning, at his besieged CP bunker, General Köchling had been relieved of his command and arrested, probably at the instigation of Gauleiter Grohé. Before he left, Köchling wrote a bitter report describing the hopeless situation west of the Rhine and openly opiniating that 'the willingness to fight has given way to resignation and apathy on the part of the command as well as the completely worn-out troops'. The general then placed himself in the custody of his chief-of-staff, and together they went back across the Rhine, where Köchling was scheduled to stand trial for dereliction of duty and possibly treason.

Defeatism was however not limited to the military. During the day, all over Cologne, party and state headquarters burned their papers and numerous uniformed personnel hastily changed into civilian clothes. Nearly every high Nazi official abandoned his post and fled to the east bank. The Gauleiter, Josef Grohé, escaped across the Rhine in a boat.





Right: **The Americans had stopped for the night just short of the German second defence line, which followed the belt of parklands around the inner city and was manned by a hotch-potch force of policemen, firemen and Volkssturm troops. Next morning, March 6, the Americans broke through this ring at several places. Fred Ramage of *Life* and Keystone followed the CCA tank/infantry team on the Venloer Strasse axis of advance. At each crossroads the column dropped off tanks to protect its flanks. These Shermans guard the junction of Venloer Strasse with Brüsseler Strasse and Spichern-Strasse. The city centre is to the left. (IWM)** *Left:* **The facades have changed but this is the same corner as seen from Spichern-Strasse.**

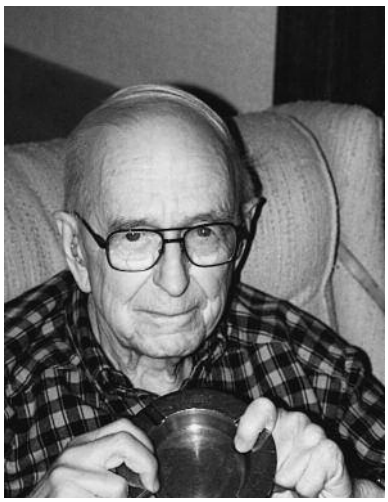
Above: **The tank/infantry team has pushed beyond the crossing with Bismarck-Strasse and is approaching the Friesenplatz. (IWM)** *Below:* **The same crossroads today. The tram lines have gone underground.**

MARCH 6

The following day, March 6, through incessant rainy weather, the Americans continued their steady advance through the streets of Cologne.

In their sector, the 3rd Armored drove quickly through the heart of the city, where destruction from the long years of aerial bombardment was heaviest. On the left, CCB's Task Force Welborn cleared the huge Nippes rail marshalling yards, a site of devastation with hundreds of freight cars and oil tankers standing abandoned on broken sidings. Task Force Lovelady pushed through the Riehl factory area, overcoming a last-ditch defence, and reached the Rhine. On the right, CCA's advance followed the general line of the Venloer Strasse, the main thoroughfare entering the city from the north-west.

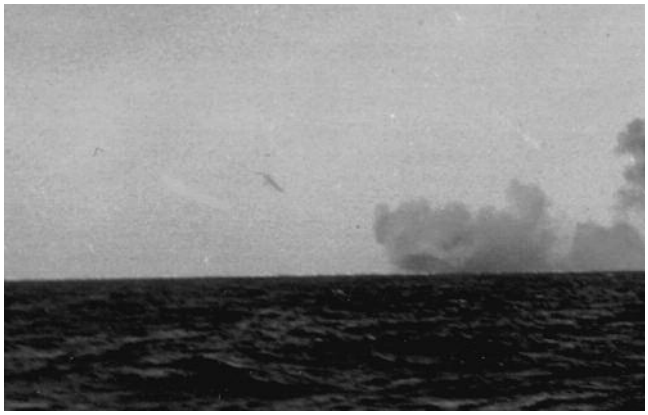
Looking back down Venloer Strasse from Friesenplatz. The building in the background is the one on the corner of



Brüsseler Strasse seen in the earlier picture. In the distance is the railway viaduct leading into Bahnhof West. (IWM)

Above: **Signal Corps photographer Himes was still with the CCA team that advanced down the parallel Subbelrather Strasse. By the morning of the 6th, this column had also broken through the German inner defence ring and into Gladbacher Strasse. Himes pictured an M26 Pershing tank firing point-blank at a German tank further down the street. The Pershing, equipped with a 90mm gun, was America's first medium/heavy tank. Only a very limited number of experimental Pershings were sent to Europe for testing, the 3rd Armored receiving its quota in late February. (The tank platoon of the 9th Armored Division which helped secure the Rhine bridge at Remagen one day after this picture was taken (see *After the Battle* No. 16) was equipped with Pershings too.) The towers rising above the end of the street are those of St Gereon Church. (USNA)** *Right:* **No tanks on the pavement today, just parked cars.**

Left: **A few hundred yards further on, Gladbacher Strasse becomes Christoph-Strasse. Another Army photographer, Lieutenant Thomas S. Noble, pictured infantrymen and armour advancing past a shot-up staff car. Note the horribly mangled corpse lying in the gutter. The ruined building on the right belongs to the Gerling concern. Visible in the left background is again the heavily damaged St Gereon Church. (USNA)** *Right:* **Comparison taken from the crossroads with Von-Werth-Strasse.**



Left: **The same crossroads, but now looking back into Gladbacher Strasse. Two Germans, waving white handkerchiefs, grin as they approach the Americans troops. (IWM)** *Right:* **Pedestrians of today wonder whom they are standing in for.**

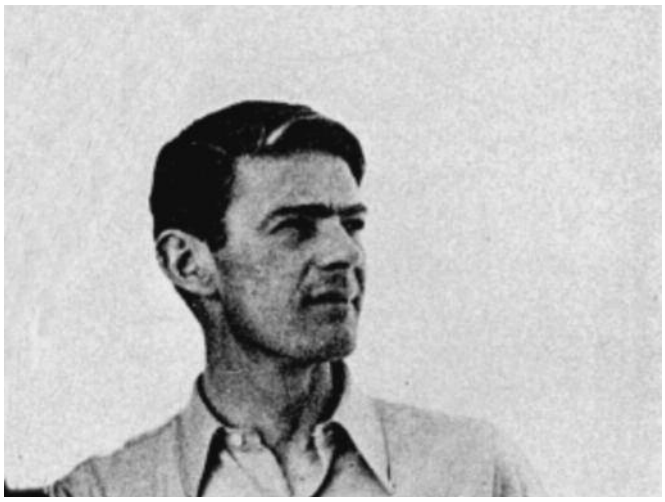
Above: **The same Pershing as seen in the earlier photograph accompanies infantrymen down Christoph-Strasse. Up ahead, the cathedral has come into view again. Picture by Himes. (USNA)** *Below:* **Today, Christoph-Strasse is wider than in 1945, the buildings on the right now standing further back and no longer hiding St Gereon Church from view.**

Armoured infantry, dismounted from its half-tracks, plodded in two well-spaced lines down the battered streets, with the tanks rolling behind them. Rubble and broken glass crunched beneath the feet of the infantry. Engineers searched streets and buildings for mines and booby-traps, but found few. In many places, the Americans found dead bodies of civilians who had been killed in the bombing raid four days before, but whom no one had found time to recover. By now, an unnatural silence had settled over the city. Sporadic mortar fire, an occasional whirr of artillery, and a sniper here and there were all that broke the stillness. Even more so than the day before, curious civilians blocked the streets. Shots would make them dive into doorways, but they would soon be back, watching the fight as though it were a stage show. In the confusion of battle, it was difficult for the GIs to determine civilians from enemy soldiers.

Some 200 yards further on, where Christoph-Strasse leads into Gereon-Strasse, the GIs pass more ruined buildings. Note the puff of shell smoke. As Himes put in his caption: the cathedral is now 'only five blocks away'. (USNA)

There were many American and British war correspondents roaming about with the forward troops, because the capture of Cologne was headline news. Their presence in the confused street-fighting was not without danger, for the peak caps worn by the correspondents so resembled the headgear worn by the German defenders that the reporters ran the risk of being shot by friendly troops. One 3rd Armored infantryman, 1st Sergeant Lamar McCrary, advised a group of correspondents to 'get your steel helmets on if you want to live'.

Around noon, a loud, crushing blow was heard from the heart of the city: German engineers had detonated the big Hohenzollern Bridge, making the last of Cologne's Rhine bridges crash into the river.



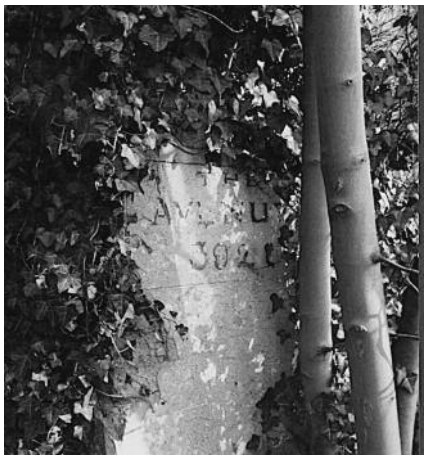
With the cathedral as a reference point, comparison photography becomes easy.

Looking back towards St Gereon. One of Cologne's oldest historic monuments, the Romanesque church — crowning site for Merovingian kings — suffered heavily during the war. Its

13th-century decagonal dome burned out completely after the 1,000-bomber raid of May 1943, and in 1944 the decagon's north-western wall was destroyed by an HE bomb. (ECPA)

The Shermans follow the infantry down Gereon-Strasse. Cologne was really an infantry battle, the armour being used primarily in a support role. Note the shot-up Ford 3-tonne lorry on the right. This picture was taken a little back and to the left of the one opposite, the photographer (from the US Air Force) standing almost back against the church. (USNA)

Left: **The same lorry with the dead driver (judging from the hat, a civilian) lying alongside. Note the sign pointing the way to the Hohenzollern Rhine bridge. Someone has chalked 'Rosenbaum,**



Cologne' on the Sherman — perhaps a Jewish person who has emerged from hiding now that liberation has come. (ECPA)
Right: **Different car, same tree. Gereonsdriesch, March 1999.**

We return to the Venloer Strasse line of advance. The CCA team on this axis has by now reached the beginning of Zeughaus-Strasse. On the right stands another of Cologne's famous monuments, the Römerturm (Roman Tower) dating from 50 A.D. and once part of the Roman town walls. It survived the war undamaged. (ECPA)

As it enters Zeughaus-Strasse, the column meets resistance. 'Infantrymen advance under enemy machine-gun, mortar and artillery fire' says the caption to this picture by Fred Ramage. Note the man wearing the long raincoat taking pictures — another of the many press photographers following the advance. (IWM)

Left: **Yard by yard, the Americans battle their way towards the cathedral. Further down the street, infantrymen hug beside the Zeughaus (armoury) after which this particular street is named.**

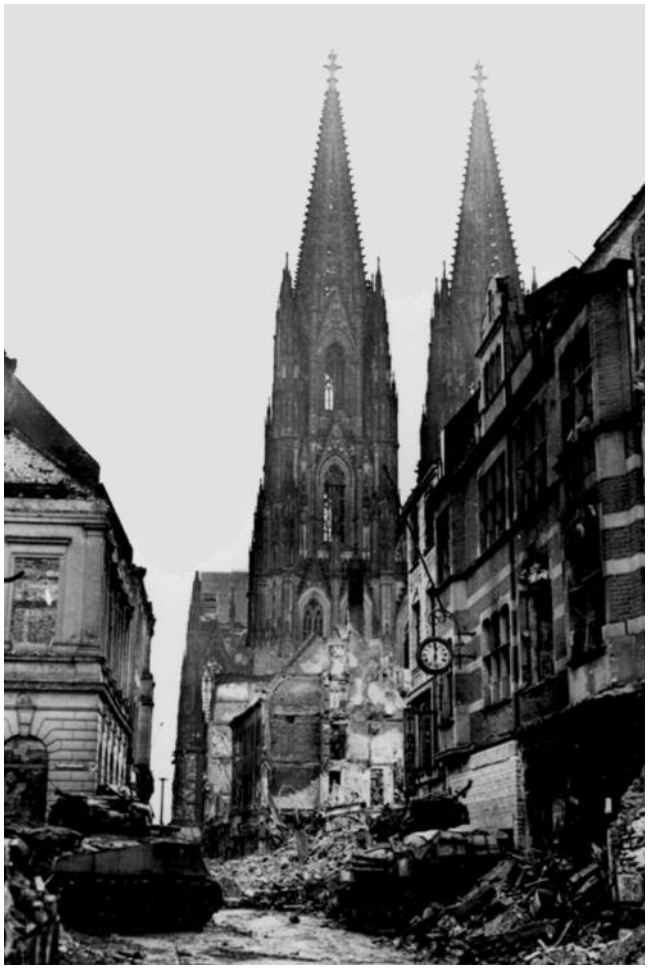
The 16th-century baroque structure, built on Roman town-wall foundations, was gutted by fire in one of the air raids. (USNA) *Right:* **Today, the Zeughaus houses the Cologne Stadtmuseum.**

Nearby, Ramage pictured a GI inspecting a still-smoking German machine gun (a pre-war model) which was in action against the Americans until a few minutes before. Throughout the Cologne operation, to give it added infantry strength, the 3rd Armored Division had the 13th Infantry Regiment of the 8th Division attached to it, so the GI in this picture could be either from that unit or from the 3rd Armored's own organic 36th Armored Infantry Regiment. (IWM)

Although the Volkssturm had already been created in October 1944, the Cologne offensive was the first in which the US First Army actually met units of this last-ditch defence force. In general, the Volkssturm units were of little use in battle, most of them either quickly abandoning their positions or surrendering en masse after initial fire contact. Here, a Wehrmacht lieutenant and his squad of Volkssturm members (in civilian clothes) are rounded up for despatch to the POW cages.

Despite the extensive reconstruction in Cologne, we were able to identify most of the pictures taken during the 1945 battle.

However, although it looked easy beforehand, we could not find this one, by Tech/5 Himes, of GIs taking cover. (USNA)



Just before the 3rd Armored reached the cathedral square, there occurred a short tank skirmish which, because of the presence of so many war reporters with the forward troops, produced some of the most-dramatic and spectacular combat images to come out of the war. Two of the Sherman tanks advancing cautiously down Zeughaus-Strasse and into Komödien-Strasse paused on the corner of Andreaskloster *(opposite page, top left).* **Several war photographers were moving with the tanks, using them for cover. Fred Ramage was with the tank that had halted below the clock. He and the crew were thirsty, so Ramage went in search for something to drink. Then, he says: 'There was an ominous silence. I saw a German tank approach from a side road. It was too late to run. Thinking our tank would shoot first, I turned my camera on it. But the German shell struck first. An American was blown into the air. You can see him falling back onto the tank. One man from the other American tank ran to help; another to get an ambulance'** *(opposite below left).* **The blast of the shell threw one crew member, assistant driver Oliver Griffin, out of his hatch, unhurt. Another man, the gunner, his left leg blown off at the knee, managed to crawl out of the turret and off the tank's deck. (This scene was also captured on cine film.) Helped by a medic, Ralph Arcelay, Griffin dragged his crewmate away from the Sherman and into a bomb crater, where they dressed his wound** *(above left).* **War correspondent Mike Levin, a reporter from Overseas News Service, noted down Griffin's first reaction: 'I don't know how I got out . . . I don't know how *he* got out. The sons of bitches.' The other three crewmen perished inside the tank. The incident was covered by at least two other photographers, Frenchman Eric Schwab of Agence France Presse (who formed a team with Mike Levin) and Allan Jackson of International News Service (who six weeks later was to make the famous bridge-hand-shake pictures at the US-Soviet link-up at Torgau — see *After the Battle* No. 88).** *Above right:* **Jackson took this picture a few minutes later (after the Panther which had hit the Sherman had been knocked out; its smoking turret can just be seen beyond the rubble heap at the end of the street). The man on the left in the long coat wearing the cap is very likely Fred Ramage. (IWM)** *Below:* **Komödien-Strasse has been widened to the left, but the entrance to Andreaskloster remains.**

The Sherman had been knocked out by a lone Panther tank lurking in front of the cathedral, the crew of which were determined to fight a courageous but futile last-ditch defence. A pair of Signal Corps cameramen — Tech/3 Leon Rosenberg and Tech/4 James Bates — were filming the Panther, which they believed to be out of action, from an upstairs window of a building on the corner of An den Dominikanern and Marzellen-Strasse when suddenly the panzer turned to open fire on the Sherman in Komödien-Strasse. An M26 Pershing tank down below in Marzellen-Strasse immediately reacted and after a swift exchange of armour-piercing rounds, the Panther burst into flames, having been hit three times. Three of the crew managed to climb out of the turret just before it was engulfed by fire, but two others burned to death inside. The cameramen covered it all — certainly one of the most-spectacular pieces of combat footage ever filmed. (ECPA)

As the 3rd Armored neared the Dom cathedral, there was one short, final skirmish as a lone Panther tank, luring on the cathedral square, opened up and hit a Sherman in Komödien-Strasse, killing three of the crew. The Panther was quickly engaged by an M26 Pershing tank from a side street and brewed up.

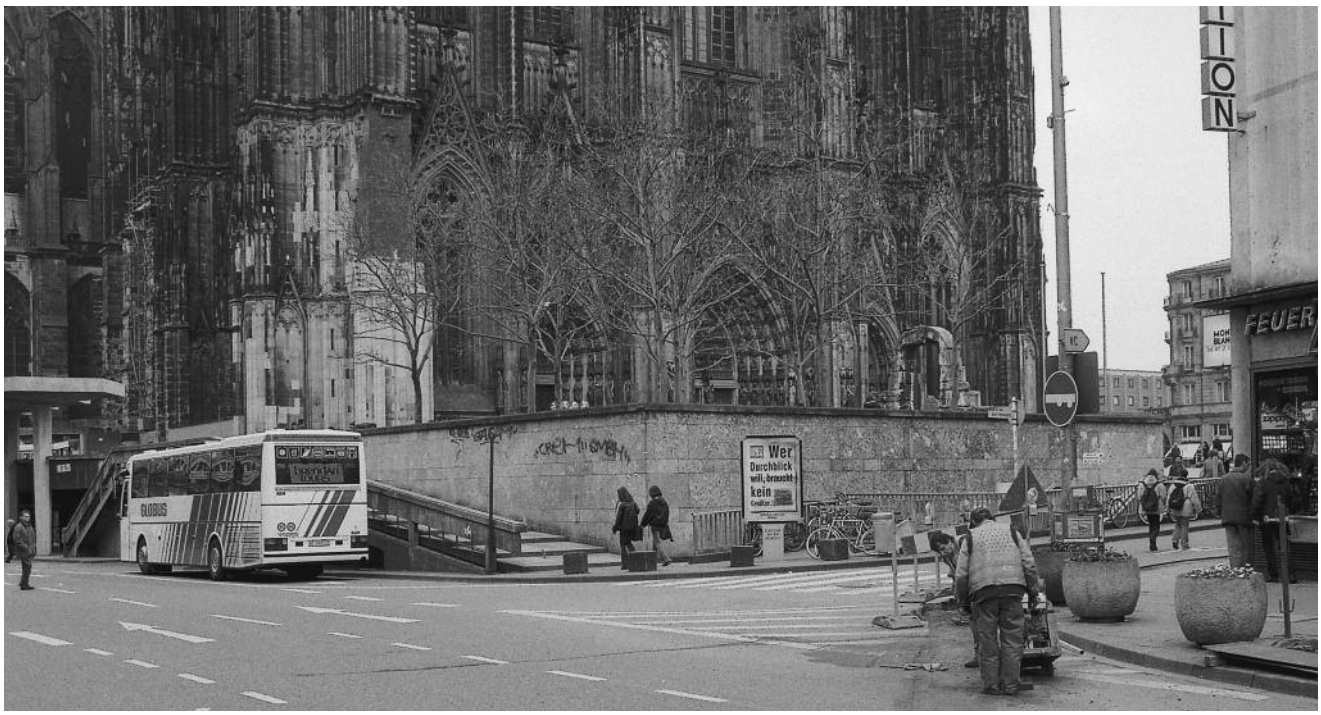
With the last opposition crushed, the 3rd Armored at 1845 hours reached the badly-wrecked Hauptbahnhof (main railway station) and, behind it, the blown Hohenzollern Bridge. Close by, amid the sea of ruins, stood the stately cathedral, damaged but basically intact.

Right: **Halfway through the action, they quickly changed to another lens to get a closer view of the exploding tank. (ECPA)**
Below: **Taking still pictures from the same window was Tech/5 John Himes. With his standard 35mm lens, he could not get so close. The cameraman probably did not realise it but the building they were in was the HQ of the Deutsche Arbeitsfront (German Labour Front). (USNA)**

Left: **The three escaped German crewmen were captured shortly after when a group of 30 German policemen emerged from a shelter beneath the cathedral (the so-called Dom-Bunker), surrendering to the first Americans they saw: four reporters — war correspondent Mike Levin of ONA and three cameramen of the 165th Signal Company, Captain Charles Malley, Staff Sergeant Voight Carrell and Sergeant Harold Robert — who had boldly ventured out in front of the infantry. Shortly after, the Americans found the three Panther crewmen in the emergency aid post below the Dom: Leutnant Barthell Bortr had three leg wounds, Obergefreiter Otto Koenich a burned face, and the third man lay dying on his bed. (IWM)** *Right:* **This picture, by an RAF photographer, was taken from Burgmauer, the short street opposite the main doors.**

Comparison taken from the second floor of what today is the Cologne Sozialgericht (Social Court).

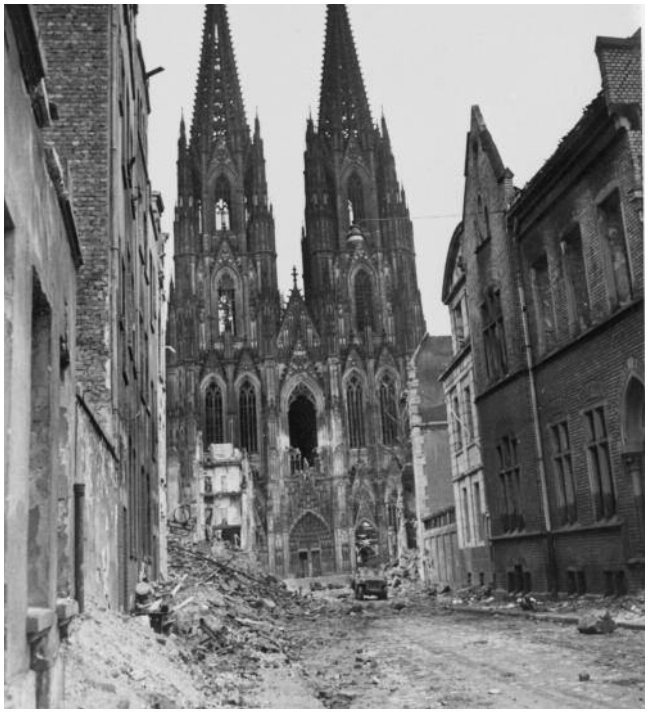
The brewed-up Panther, still standing where it had been knocked out, became an obvious focus of attention for the many photographers who came to visit Cologne in the days and weeks after its capture. *Right:* **This picture was taken shortly after the fight while the tank was still smouldering. Note the Army cameraman coming from the cathedral. (USNA)** *Below:* **The RAF photographer arrived on the scene after the tank had burned out. These pictures also give a good view of the bomb damage to the cathedral's west facade. The large west window had been destroyed in the RAF raid of January 28, 1945. (IWM)** *Bottom:* **The cathedral square, which used to slope up to the church, has since been raised above the surrounding streets.**



Left: **German civilians walk past the dead panzer and into Marzellen-Strasse. In the background, next to the cathedral, the famed Dom Hotel, still in business today.** *Right:* **Road workers repair the corner where the tank stood 54 years ago.**

Four weeks later, and someone has turned the tank's turret and removed the muzzle brake from its gun. Picture taken on April 4 by US Army photographer Smaluch. By then, the 82nd Airborne Division had taken over the Cologne sector — the GI looking at the sign is Corporal Luther E. Boger of the 325th Glider Infantry Regiment. As General James Gavin, the 82nd commander, relates in his memoirs: 'One Tiger [*sic*] was left standing in the square in front of the cathedral. We decided to use it to test our various anti-tank weapons, including the German panzerfaust, as well as our bazooka and the 57mm. The panzerfaust was by far the best weapon, if one was ready to wait until the tank was within approximately 50 yards.' However, the neat hole in the tank's side armour is not from the test-firing — it can already be seen in the earlier photos so it must be from the Pershing's 90mm gun which knocked the tank out on March 6. (USNA)

The day after the tank battle, Army photographer Tech/5 W. B. Allen climbed the steps of the cathedral towers and took this shot of the knocked-out Panther on Domplatz. The tank is facing Komödien-Strasse (the spot where the Sherman was disabled is just outside the frame) and its gun barrel is pointing down Marzellen-Strasse. The small street in between is Andreaskloster, and the broader street on the left is Burgmauer. (USNA) *Below:* **The same view today.**



The cathedral as seen from Burgmauer after the end of the fighting. A magnificent example of Gothic architecture, the 13th-century cathedral had first been heavily damaged in the RAF raid of June 28/29, 1943 — Cologne's worst raid of the war — after which it had been closed for religious services. By war's end it had been hit by 12 HE bombs, innumerable incendiaries, and 19 artillery shells. Considering that it stood directly adjacent to prime bombing targets like the main railway station and the Hohenzollern Bridge, it was indeed a miracle that the cathedral had escaped major destruction, but damage to it was still considerable. Nine of the church's 22 roof arches had been destroyed and a further eight damaged. The interior ceiling of the nave had collapsed and the north tower had been nicked by a bomb. (USNA)A)

The ruined shell of the Hauptbahnhof, the central railway station, with the St Maria Himmelfahrt Church on the left. (USNA)

Bahnhofsvorplatz today. On the right, steps now lead directly up to the raised square around the cathedral.

Ripped apart by Allied bombs: Platform 2a as seen from Platform 1 — then and now . . .

BOOBY
TRAPPED

While the 3rd Armored fought its way to the cathedral, the 104th Division continued its push in the southern sector. Covering this advance was photographer Tech/4 Leo Moran (who had also taken the picture at Manheim — see page 5). One spot where the 104th Division broke through the German inner defence ring was along Luxemburger Strasse, the main road into the city from the south-east. Here, as elsewhere, the Germans used 88mm flak guns as direct-fire weapon against the Americans. This gun, pictured by Moran on March 7, was knocked out by the 414th Infantry. (USNA)

On the 3rd Armored's right, the 104th Division made equally steady progress that day. At 0645 hours, the 414th and 415th Infantry started out with the same four battalions advancing abreast, supported by the Shermans of the 750th Tank Battalion (Lieutenant Colonel John A. White) and the M36 90mm gun carriages of the 692nd Tank Destroyer Battalion (Lieutenant Colonel S. S. Moore). Here too, there was sniper fire, sporadic mortaring, some large-calibre artillery coming in, and curious civilians crowding on the roads, and the advance was held up several times. In the afternoon, a patrol from the 415th Infantry, composed of Pfcs Charles E. Cheatham and Francis H. Wilbur, sneaked across the regimental phase line and at 1400 hours reached the bank of the Rhine at a point overlooking the Hohenzollern Bridge, thus becoming the first US troops to reach the river at Cologne. By nightfall, the 414th Infantry was 1,000 yards west of the Rhine, while the 415th had 500 yards to go.

On this day, in the 8th Division sector on the south-western outskirts, the 121st Infantry cleared Hermülheim, Kendenich and Hürth, thus cutting the highway leading into Cologne from Zülpich. Nearer to the Rhine, the 28th Infantry took Rondorf and Messenich, thereby severing another main road, the one from Euskirch.

Right: **Luxemburger Strasse today, taken from the Eifelwall tram-stop.**

A Sherman of the 750th Tank Battalion — the tank unit attached to the 104th Division on a permanent basis — rolls down a bomb-ruined street while doughboys of the 415th Infantry cautiously peer around a corner of a post office. Another picture by Moran. (USNA)

With no clue given in the caption as to the location, we were very lucky to find this picture, taken on the corner of Roon-Strasse and Rathenau-Platz. The former post office is now a Mexican restaurant. The sole building left standing across the street has been carefully restored.

Some 200 yards further on, Moran pictured men of the 415th Infantry dashing from Roon-Strasse across Zülpicher Platz towards the heavily-damaged Herz-Jezu Church. The black smudge is on the original negative. (USNA)

The same spot in March 1999. Herz-Jezu-Kirche is undergoing new restoration.

Right: **On March 7, all regiments of the 104th Division reached the banks of the Rhine. Moran crept forward to picture men of Company G, 2nd Battalion, 415th Infantry, crouching in the rubble on Thurnmarkt. Right in front of them is the western ramp of the Hindenburg Bridge, and below it one can just see the wrecked Hohenzollern Bridge further downstream. (USNA)**

MARCH 7

The following morning, March 7, the 3rd Armored cleared up a last, small sector in the north-eastern part of the city.

The 104th Division, its operational zone extended to the south because of the southward shifting of the 8th Division, directed the 2nd Battalion of the 414th to launch an attack against the suburb of Efferen, on the south-west border of Cologne. Striking at 0200 in a bold night attack, the battalion caught the Germans there bewildered and disorganised, resulting in the seizure of the town and numerous SP guns and tanks. After daylight, the 413th Infantry, until now in reserve, was ordered to take over the extended zone and press the attack towards the Rhine in the southern edges of Cologne. This it did, sending its 2nd Battalion to relieve that of the 414th at Efferen and deploying its 3rd Battalion to the north of there.

Starting at 0645 hours and now advancing with three regiments abreast, the 104th Division began mopping up the remaining areas of Cologne. At 0900, the 1st and 2nd Battalions, 415th Infantry, reached the Rhine near the collapsed Hindenburg Bridge. At 0745, the 3rd Battalion, 414th Infantry, reported Company K on the river, and by 0945 the whole regiment stood closed on the river's edge. By 1229, the 3rd Battalion, 413th, had pushed through the southern outskirts of the city to the wealthy suburb of Marienburg and also reached the river bank. By nightfall, apart from sporadic fighting in the south-east corner of the city, all resistance in Cologne had been crushed.

That day, the 8th Division reached the Rhine too. After capturing Immendorf, the 28th Infantry moved its 3rd Battalion round through the 104th Division's sector in Cologne to attack the river-bank suburb of Rodenkirchen from the north. Later in the day, the division took the river towns of Weiss and Godorf further south. Again, the German forces were split. The remnants of the LVIII. Panzerkorps, along with contingents of the 3. Panzergrenadier-Division which had fallen back southward away from Cologne, formed a last-ditch defence across an eastward bend of the Rhine, but began to evacuate the position early next morning.

The area around Thurnmarkt has been transformed with the post-war reconstruction, river-bank traffic now being funnelled through underground tunnels, and new development occupying much of the site. This is the best comparison possible today.

Left: **The Hindenburg Bridge (also known as the Deutz Suspension Bridge) had unexpectedly collapsed on February 28, one week before, throwing soldiers and refugees together with tanks, trucks and carts into the river.** *Right:* **The rebuilt bridge.**

Across the road from Thurnmarkt, the GIs found the equestrian statue on Heumarkt shattered and fallen from its pedestal.

Horse and rider are back but Heumarkt is being reconstructed yet again. Comparison from the Kaufmännische Krankenkasse.

Left: **An infantry patrol of the 415th Infantry passing St Severin Church in the southern part of the old city — the Altstadt-Süd. Picture taken by Tech/4 James E. Myers on March 12. (March 12 was the day on which the US Military Government declared St Severin and all other churches in Cologne 'historic monuments' and 'off limits' to everyone in order to preclude further damage from plundering.) (USNA)** *Right:* **Our comparison was taken from Am St Magdalenen.**

Left: **GIs are dwarfed by the massive destruction at the Opel-Reparaturwerkstätten (Opel motor works repair shops) in Oskar-Jäger-Strasse in the Ehrenfeld industrial district, cleared by the 104th Division on March 5. Picture taken by an RAF photographer who naturally had a special interest in documenting the ravages wrought by the RAF bombers. (IWM)** *Right:* **Completely rebuilt, the Opel workshops are still where they were during the war, at No. 99.**

Left: **Although other American units tried, and got close to, grabbing a Rhine bridge inside a city (for example the 83rd Division at Oberkassel on March 2 and the 2nd Armored at Krefeld-Uerdingen on the 4th), American hopes of capturing a Rhine bridge at Cologne were dim from the start, and it came as no surprise that the Germans blew the last remaining one, the Hohenzollern, at noon on March 6, shortly before the Americans reached the city centre. Here, a Sherman guards the ramp leading up to the road bridge.** *Right:* **The area between the cathedral and the bridge is now occupied by the new Wallraf-Richarz-Museum/Ludwig-Museum and Cologne Philharmonic building. This is the best comparison possible today.**

Left: **GIs walk up to the western end of the Hohenzollern Bridge. This is the ramp of the road bridge, with the railway bridge just visible on the left. The equestrian statue of Kaiser Wilhelm II is by Louis Tuaillon and dates from 1911. (ECPA)** *Right:* **After the war, hoping thereby to persuade the Reichsbahn to rebuild the rail bridge further north, in 1947 the city of Cologne sold off the wreckage of the Hohenzollern road bridge to Duisburg (where today it still spans a branch of the Ruhr in the city's river port). However, the Reichsbahn decided to rebuild the Hohenzollern on the same spot and, with the road bridge gone, the third span was made a railway bridge too. Today, a pedestrian path has been added for visitors to the Messegelände trade fair. Picture taken from what is now Heinrich-Böll-Platz.**

Left: **On April 13, five weeks after they captured the western half of Cologne, American forces entered the part of the city on the east bank of the Rhine. On the 16th, Army photographer R. E. Duckworth pictured displaced persons of various nationalities waiting at the eastern end of the wrecked Hohenzollern Bridge for permission to cross to the west bank. (USNA)** *Right:* **The distinctive towers at either end of the Hohenzollern were pulled down in 1957, but all four equestrian statues have been retained.**

Left: **Civilians survey the ruins on the corner of An den Dominikanern and Marzellen-Strasse (they are standing outside the building from which the burning Panther was filmed). On the right, the damaged shell of the Excelsior Ernst Hotel. Just visible, at the end of the street, part of the Hauptbahnhof. The wrecked car is a 1937 Opel Olympia.** *Right:* **The same corner today.**

MILITARY GOVERNMENT

As soon as the fighting died down, and sometimes even earlier, the local population of Cologne resorted to large-scale plundering. In the old-town shopping district, what goods remained in the cellars of the bombed-out department stores were carried off. Private homes of people who had fled, especially Nazi top figures, were emptied of furniture and other valuables. At the Nippes railway yards, where stranded freight cars stood loaded with everything from heavy ammunition to Cologne water, hundreds of German civilians and foreign slave labourers — Russian, Poles, Frenchmen — were breaking open cars, and hauling off sacks and crates of foodstuff, coal, textiles and any other usable thing they could carry. The looting went on for two days, but on March 8 American MPs were called in to restore order.

All of Cologne west of the Rhine was now in Allied hands. Although the Allies announced to the world that Cologne had fallen on March 7, formally it was not completely true for that part of the city lying on the east bank of the Rhine — the districts of Mülheim, Kalk and Deutz — stayed in German hands, and would remain so for another five weeks. It was only after the Allied Rhine crossings at Remagen in the south and near Wesel in the north, and the ensuing attack into the so-called Ruhr Pocket that this part of Cologne would be taken.

The 104th Division stayed in the city to guard the river line, taking over the sectors of the 8th Division on March 8 and those of the 3rd Armored Division on the 17th. The troops found themselves good billets in the houses, and established observation posts in houses overlooking the river. In all, the divisional sector extended some 12 miles, from Worringen in the north to Wesseling in the south. Except for an occasional exchange of artillery or mortar fire and odd patrols sent across the river at night, there was little activity.

On March 9, US Military Government Detachment E1H2 moved in to assume administration of the city. The American Town Commander was Lieutenant Colonel John K. Patterson. Wall posters and loudspeaker vans announced the new regulations, including the duty to turn in all arms and ammunition, the obligation for every citizen remaining in Cologne to register, and a night curfew. American infantry squads, accompanied by Counter-Intelligence Corps officers, systematically searched every building for weapons, radios and cameras. Nazi officials who had not fled were arrested and detained in the Klingelpütz prison, where the Americans had earlier liberated some 85 prisoners of the Gestapo.

Above: **Headquarters of the US Military Government detachment in Cologne was at Kaiser-Wilhelm-Ringstrasse 2. Picture taken by Captain Leo Lieb on April 10, 1945. (USNA)** *Below:* **Virtually unchanged in 54 years.**

On March 11, 1945 — four days after the fall of Cologne — the VII Corps held an official flag-raising ceremony at the city's Müngersdorf sports stadium — in Nazi times the venue of numerous mass meetings — to celebrate the conquest of the historic Rhine city. Watched from the grandstand by 2,500 men from the 3rd Armored, 8th, and 104th Divisions, a platoon from each major unit in the VII Corps stood on the field as a guard of honour for the massed colours of all units. The corps commander, Lieutenant General J. Lawton Collins, inspected the formation, then presented the colour bearers with an American flag. Next, he gave a short address in which he reminded his listeners that this was the first raising of an American flag on the Rhine since US occupation troops withdrew from Germany in 1923 (in actual fact, the 99th Division had already held a flag-raising ceremony on the Rhine on March 7) and honoured the units that had fought to conquer Cologne. 'We pause to remember those men who gave their lives so that we might be here', he said. The colour bearers then marched to the flag pole at the other end of the field, where arms were presented. As the Stars and Stripes was raised, the band played *The Star Spangled Banner,* the troops saluted the flag and a flight of P-47 fighter-bombers wheeled by overhead. (USNA)

The stadium on Aachener Strasse, home of FC Köln, is now a modern arena able to receive 60.500 spectators. Fortunately, the original processional avenue and gate buildings of the old stadium (to the back of the camera) still remain.

Left: **As the Allies fought their way into Cologne, they found numerous dead bodies of people killed in the last air raid on the city on March 2 lying unrecovered in the streets. This victim lay in what remained of Höhe Strasse.** *Right:* **Fifty-four years on, and a starker contrast is hardly imaginable. Completely rebuilt, Höhe Strasse is now Cologne's main shopping street.**

On March 10, the Military Government charged Dr Robert Grosche, the highest clerical official remaining in the city, to find 15 persons with an unblemished record and who had not been Nazi Party members, to assume civilian administration of the city. First job of this committee, which began work under former city treasurer Willi Suth, was to get water and electricity running again. To maintain law and order, a force of 300 German auxiliary policemen was created under Erich Winkler, who in 1933 had lost his police job because he was a Jew.

On March 19-21, the 104th Division was relieved of its Rhine-guarding duty by the 8th Division, who in turn handed over to the newly-arrived 86th Division (Major General Harris M. Melasky) on March 28-29. On April 4th, the 86th Division was in turn relieved by the 82nd Airborne Division (Major General James M. Gavin), whose 325th Glider Infantry Regiment took over the sector inside the city.

The guarding of the Cologne river front became superfluous on April 13, when the 13th Armored Division (Major General John B. Wogan) of the First Army, advancing on the other side of the river from the south, reached the eastern part of the city, occupying it without a fight.

With both of the Cologne's river banks now in Allied hands, within two weeks American engineers completed the General McNair Bridge, a wooden pile structure (nicknamed 'the centipede' by the Colognians) next to the wreckage of the Hindenburg Bridge, the first fixed span re-connecting the two sides of the city (see *After the Battle* No. 73).

On May 4, Military Government appointed Konrad Adenauer, who had already been Oberbürgermeister of Cologne from 1917-33, as the city's new mayor. Adenauer held the position only five months before the British Military Government (which had taken over Cologne from the Americans on June 21) relieved him on October 9 because of disatisfaction with the progress he had made in the city's reconstruction programme. (In 1949, Adenauer became the first Chancellor of the new West German Federal Republic.)

Left: **Konrad Adenauer, reinstated as Oberbürgermeister of Cologne by the Allied Military Government on May 4, inspects the ruins of the Altes Rathaus with the city's keeper of monuments, Dr Hans Vogts. The city of Cologne had just finished restoring the 15th-century building in Judengasse in 1937, only to see it destroyed again during the war. (IWM)** *Right:* **Though all plans and blueprints of the restoration were destroyed by fire, the town hall was again reconstructed after the war.**

GUARDS VC: BLITZKRIEG 1940

By Dilip Sarkar

Amongst the many British Army reservists re-called to the Colours in September 1939, was my (now late) grandfather, who had served in the Grenadier Guards between 1928-31; 2611042 Guardsman Herbert Henry 'Bert' Smith consequently travelled south from Worcester, in company with 2613284 Guardsman Arthur Rice, and re-joined the 3rd Battalion at Aldershot: Once a Grenadier, always a Grenadier.

The 3rd Battalion Grenadier Guards was a part of the 1st Guards Brigade, the other battalions of which being the 2nd Battalion Coldstream Guards and 2nd Battalion Hampshire Regiment. With the 2nd and 3rd Brigades, the 1st Guards Brigade formed the 1st Infantry Division which, together with the 2nd Division and 48th (South Midland) Division, served in I Corps under Major-General the Hon. Harold Alexander (known as 'General Alex', a distinguished Irish Guardsman). On September 19, 1939, the 1st Guards Brigade entrained for Southampton and sailed for Cherbourg. These men of I Corps were, therefore, amongst the first soldiers to arrive in France. For the next eight months, however, they would fortify a defensive line along the Franco-Belgian border, which would never be put to the test. This lack of action and monotony became known as the 'Phoney War'.

At last, on May 10, 1940, Hitler launched his offensive against the West which contravened both Dutch and Belgian neutrality. The Allies therefore activated Plan 'D', the British Expeditionary Force — the BEF — moving forward some 60 miles from its prepared defence line into unfamiliar territory.

The Germans, however, had cleverly disguised the fact that their main attack, comprising almost all of their armour, was further south. As the Allies advanced into Belgium, therefore, the BEF was already being outflanked to the south. Gort's Army was soon in danger of both envelopment and encirclement. The sensible decision was made to fall back on the River Escaut and there make a determined stand against the enemy. These were difficult times for the British infantryman, however, who, having marched many miles into Belgium now had to about turn towards the Franco-Belgian border without having yet met the enemy.

On May 18, the BEF withdrew from the Dendre line to the River Escaut. Three British divisions dug in along the Escaut's west bank. The BEF's Commander-in-Chief, Lord Gort (also a Grenadier and VC holder), understood that he had to maintain the defence of this important anti-tank obstacle with the French 1ère Armée on his right and the Belgian Army to his left. On May 20, he would be mainly concerned with the next Theatre-level moves: co-ordinating the important counter-attack with French forces at Arras, and with the option to withdraw to the coast. These vitally important options would depend, in fact, upon the outcome of the major defensive battle the BEF was at last poised to fight.

The BEF's allotted sector of the River Escaut was 32 miles long. Seven divisions were deployed along the BEF line, running from north of Oudenaarde to Maulde on the French frontier. All brigades were deployed forward, leaving the line's centre with scanty reserves. Defence in depth was sacrificed in favour of defending the riverline. The Escaut (or Schelde) itself was just enough to be a significant obstacle, being on average 50 yards wide, but the lowering of the water level (by the French at Valenciennes) made it hard in places to observe the water due to the high banks created.

The sector allotted to the 1st Guards Brigade was in and around the town of Pecq. The 2nd Battalion Coldstream Guards defended a front of 1,800 yards, from a bend in the Escaut to the large tannery (which provided a superb field of fire) and river fronting the town itself. The 3rd Grenadier forward companies were also deployed along the riverbank, about one mile south of Pecq and in front of the hamlet called Esquelmes. The main Pont-à-Chin road ran parallel with the river about half-a-mile west, and Battalion HQ was situated a mile westwards from the river in the village of Bailleul. Captain L. S. Starkey's No. 3 Company and Lieutenant H. Reynell-Pack's Carrier Platoon were held in reserve there. On the riverbank itself, Major W. R. J. Alston-Roberts-West's No. 4 Company covered the Grenadiers' left flank while Captain P. J. C. Radford-Norcorp's No. 2 Company were in the centre and Captain P. T. Clifton's No 1. Company to the right. The 2nd Battalion Hampshire Regiment was held in brigade reserve at Estaimbourg, a small village, like Bailleul, a mile to the rear. The whole sector, however, was overlooked by the imposing Mont-St-Aubert on the east bank, in German hands, and which provided a great observatory.

After their nine-month sojourn in Belgium and France, the 3rd Battalion Grenadier Guards returned via the beaches at Dunkirk to camp at Louth in Lincolnshire. There in July 1940 they re-enacted the action fought on the River Escaut on May 21 for which Lance Corporal Harry Nicholls received the Victoria Cross. *Top:* **This is one of a series of photographs from that occasion, taken for a feature in the *Illustrated* magazine. On the right is Percy Nash, who supported Lance Corporal Nicholls throughout his 'act of signal valour'. Although Nash's courage was not recognised by a gallantry award, he was immediately promoted to King's Sergeant in the field. On the left, standing in for Lance Corporal Harry Nicholls, is Guardsman Jack Nicholls, brother of the VC; there were, in fact, four Nicholls brothers serving in the 3rd Grenadiers.** *Above:* **Another Louth re-enactment picture showing No. 3 Company of the 3rd Grenadiers charging in support of a Bren Carrier. Note that the Guardsmen are wearing gasmasks! (Grenadier Guards.)**

The opponents. Four 3rd Grenadier Officers pictured in France during the 'Phoney War': Captain Lort-Phillips, Captain Gordon-Lennox, Second Lieutenant Reynell-Pack and Lieutenant Edward Ford. On May 21, 1940, Reynell-Pack led three Bren Carriers against the German machine guns on Poplar Ridge, all three were destroyed in close combat and Reynell-Pack remains missing in action to this day. Lieutenant Ford was the battalion intelligence officer and led a patrol along Poplar Ridge after dark on the 21st; there he counted over 30 dead Germans and noted indications that others had already been buried (presumably) by the Grenadier prisoners. (Grenadier Guards)

After dark on May 20, so as to deny the Germans the advantage of observation, the 3rd Grenadier Guards moved down to the Escaut. At 0130 hours, the bridge at Pecq was blown by the Royal Engineers; it was a noisy prelude to a fierce battle.

Facing the 1st Guards Brigade was the 31. Infanterie-Division, commanded by Generalleutnant Kaempfe. This division included three infantry regiments: 12, 17 and 82, respectively commanded by Obersts Ribstern, Berthold and Hozbach. Preparing to assault the 3rd Battalion Grenadier Guards position was II. Bataillon of Infanterie-Regiment 12, the commander of which was Hauptmann Dr Lothar Ambrosius. The IV. Armeekorps (of which the 31. Infanterie-Division was a part) was determined to seize the west bank of the Escaut. Infanterie-Regiment 82 was to attack Pecq itself whilst II./Infanterie-Regiment 12, supported by divisional artillery, two platoons of combat engineers and the anti-tank platoon of I./Infanterie-Regiment 12, was to make an assault river crossing from Leaucourt against the 3rd Grenadier positions at Esquelmes.

Unaware of the enemy's plans and movements on the east bank, at dawn on Tuesday, May 21, the BEF 'Stood To' along the Escaut. No. 4 Company of the 3rd Grenadiers, dug in on the riverbank in front of Esquelmes, was no exception. As an attack failed to materialise, however, the order was given to 'Stand Down'. Consequently the Guardsmen relaxed a little, breakfasting, shaving and cleaning their weapons. The early morning mist rising off the water and enveloping the low-lying landscape perhaps provided a feeling of security.

Complying with the German plan, at 0715 hours the enemy artillery and mortars began pounding No. 4 Company of the 3rd Grenadier Guards in advance of II./Infanterie-Regiment 12's assault. It may not have been coincidence that this determined attack was to be launched against the vulnerable 3rd Grenadier and 2nd Coldstream inter-battalion boundary: a gap of some 500 yards existed there between the Coldstream right flank and the Grenadier left. The enemy's intention after crossing the river was to strike inland (some 200 metres) for an avenue of established poplar trees rising up to the main Pont-à-Chin to Pecq road. From there, II./Infanterie-Regiment 12 was to press on, over the road and a further half-a-mile due west, and seize Bailleul.

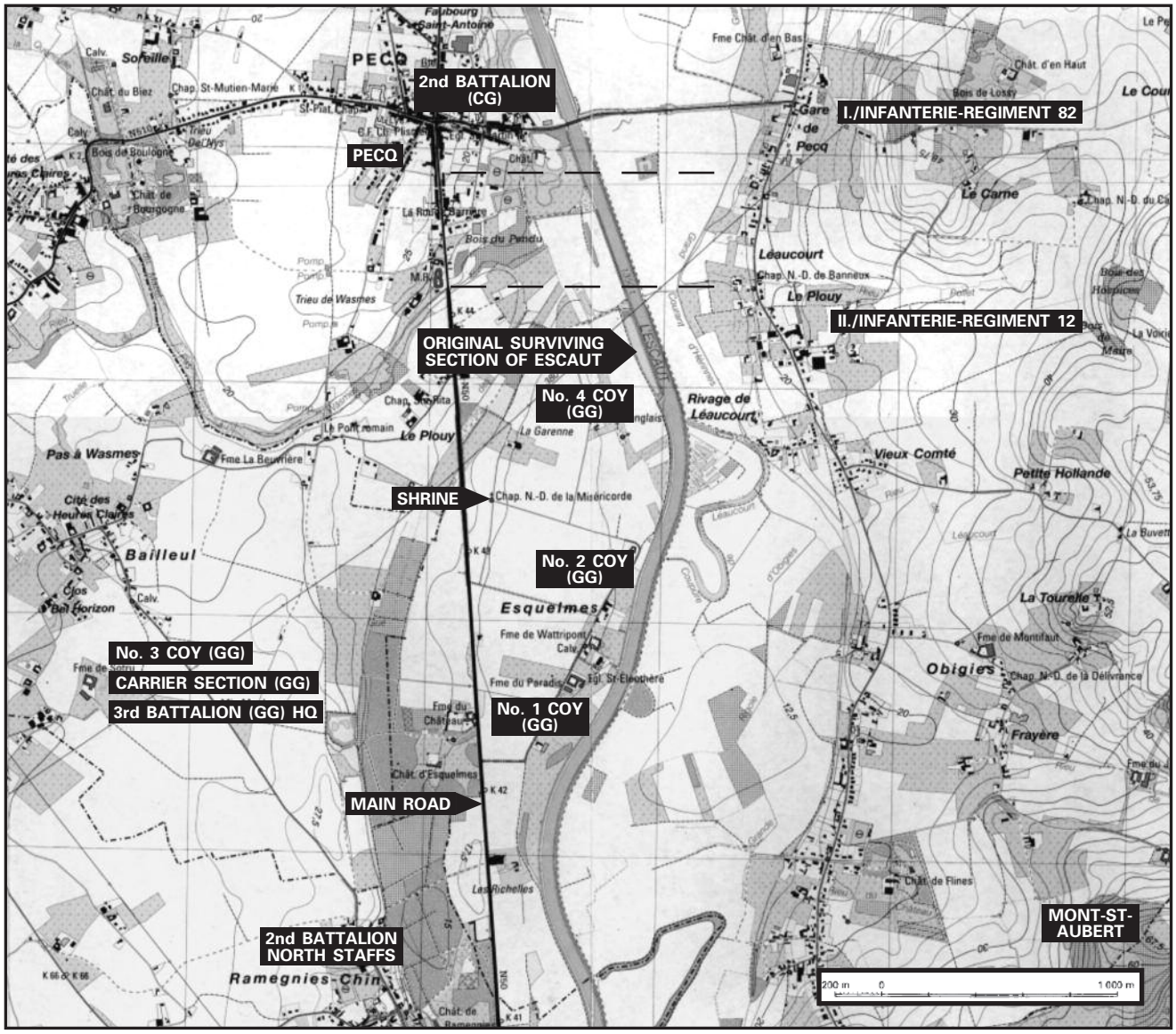
Guardsman Drinkwater: 'Suddenly all hell broke loose. The enemy opened up on No. 4 Company with artillery, trench mortar and machine-gun fire. Our left flank took an extreme battering and Major West naturally became very worried about this position — we were with him at that time in No. 4 Company HQ, situated in a large barn completely screened from the enemy by a line of trees. The shells consisted of both shrapnel and high explosive — within seconds the call for stretcher bearers went up so at Major West's order, Sergeant Bullock and myself made our way forward to the far extremity of No. 4 Company's line. Before leaving, the Company Sergeant Major gave us each a cotton bandolier containing a further 50 rounds of .303 ammunition. These were hung around our necks, our pouches being already full of bullets. We also carried our rifles and a Red Cross haversack containing shell dressings. We also wore armbands indicating the Red Cross.

'Upon leaving the shelter of the trees and bushes we ran into the full force of the enemy's fire — the din was terrible. We ran, doubled up — the ground was flat and devoid of cover. Again and again we dropped to the ground to miss bursting shells. As we went along I treated several casualties with flesh wounds. One poor fellow was caught by machine-gun bullets when returning to his trench (I assumed nature had called). He lay on his back some 20 yards from the canal. As I neared him I flattened myself to the ground. A shell landed alongside him, tearing him apart. This was the first fatality I had seen — I felt sick.

'The distance from No. 4 Company HQ to the extreme left flank was approximately 800-1,000 yards. When we arrived there it was immediately apparent that the Germans were trying to wipe out this position. Sergeant Bullock and I lay down behind a bush, the grass around us was alive with bullets which cracked over our bodies. To our amazement, through all this noise we could hear the familiar sound of a Bren gun, firing as if defying the whole German Army. The Bren was positioned on the other side of the bush, on the canal bank. I admired the guts of the two men operating the gun but realised they were the reason for the high concentration of enemy fire.

'Suddenly a terrific explosion rent the air. The Bren gun had received a direct hit which blasted Guardsman Arthur Rice clean through the bush. He looked in a dreadful mess, his knee was smashed, his leg and arm riddled with shrapnel, he also had a head wound and was bleeding profusely. Sergeant Bullock and I immediately set to with shell dressings in an attempt to stop the bleeding. In the meantime Arthur's mate lay somewhere on the canal bank — terrible screams of fear and agony came from him. He had received a nasty head wound and blood seeped into his eyes, temporarily blinding him. Sergeant Bullock decided to investigate, found this Guardsman and applied a shell dressing. We also noticed that since the Bren had been destroyed, all firing on this position had ceased — this was because the Germans were starting to launch rubber assault boats from the other bank. Sergeant Bullock made

Hauptmann Subklew, Oberleutnant Dietrichs and Hauptmann Ambrosius, all of II. Bataillon of Infanterie-Regiment 12 pictured in 1940. (Peter Taghon)



The scene of the battle on May 21, 1940. Since the war the course of the Escaut has been moved some 100 metres eastwards.

an instant decision and came through the bush leading the wounded Guardsman by the hand. He looked at the severity of Guardsman Rice's wounds and decided that if we took him with us our progress would be so slow that all four of us would be killed or at the very least captured. He ordered me to "Leave him, pull back!". I continued to give Arthur what attention I could. On looking up I saw Sergeant Bullock still leading the other wounded Guardsman by the hand — they were running like blazes. He turned once and waved me on, then they both disappeared over a slight rise.

'Although firing had ceased on the position Arthur and I still occupied, it had intensified all along the canal bank, especially in the direction of No. 4 Company HQ. I also realised that this was our only escape route. On getting Arthur up he said "Leave me, I've had it". This I refused to do.

'By this time the enemy was almost across the canal — it was obvious to me that it would be foolhardy of the enemy to follow us along the canal bank into their own fire. This proved to be correct, as on crossing the canal they proceeded straight out from the bank and were veering slightly to their left in an effort to cut off Nos. 4 and 2 Companies. Again Arthur said "Leave me, I've had it" — yet he never complained about his wounds. As we progressed blood was running down my hand — "Hell, I've been hit", I thought, but I wasn't — the blood came from Arthur's arm. As we moved slowly along the canal bank, a couple of Guardsmen pulled out of a trench, then two more. I thought "Good, here's some assistance", but these fellows were in no state to help anyone. Then I spotted Major West running along the bank towards us, exposing himself to enemy fire. When I looked again he had disappeared.

'We eventually got into Company HQ and I found a stretcher and blankets for Arthur, and a nice pile of straw for myself where I lay completely exhausted. The shelling had stopped by now but bullets were ricocheting off the roof and walls of the barn. Hearing a voice call my name I moved across to Arthur's stretcher. He gripped my hand and said "Thanks pal". It was my pleasure to shake his hand. I then returned to my pile of straw knowing that we were surrounded. The enemy were closing in.'

The river crossing had not, however, been straightforward for II./Infanterie-Regiment 12. Hauptmann Ambrosius: 'The river crossing was very difficult. The English were firing at us with rifle and machine-gun fire from all directions and it became obvious that there were many well constructed and camouflaged foxholes on the west bank which would have to be taken individually. Even when on the west bank my men faced a most difficult task. There is much marshland here and we were often wading through deep mud and water up to our waists. Enemy fire increased from all sides and in spite of our own fire and the maximum physical effort, only a few of us reached the small wood some 200 metres inland from the Escaut. Many of my soldiers had already sacrificed their blood: 40 dead and 100 wounded, amongst the latter being Oberleutnant Michael, Leutnant Ziermann, Leutnant Linemann and Dr Stromsky.'

By now No. 4 Company's position had been completely overrun. Like II./Infanterie-Regiment 12, the Grenadiers had also suffered many casualties. Amongst them was 28-year-old Guardsman Sam Hayes, killed fighting next to Guardsman Bert Smith who was wounded in the head and captured. Also taken by the enemy at this time was their section commander, Lance Corporal Bryant Everitt. No. 4 Company's commander, Major West, was dead, as was one of his platoon commanders, 2nd Lieutenant A. N. Boyd. Owing to the artillery barrage, which involved such scenes of carnage, a number of Guardsmen would either never be found or not identified.

The land between the Escaut and the main road consisted of large corn fields. Having taken No. 4 Company's position, men of II./Infanterie-Regiment 12 were also working their way slightly inland and in a southerly direction, intending to cut off Nos. 2 and 1 Companies of the battalion.

German combat engineers moving rubber boats forward to the Escaut in preparation for a river assault crossing. (Peter Taghon)

Hauptmann Ambrosius: 'The soldiers remaining with me continued to move forward up the small wooded ridge where we dug ourselves in. On my left was the Adjutant, Leutnant Engel, and on the right the machine-gun company commander, Leutnant Barthels, with a part of 5. Kompanie. On the left flank was Leutnant Hasselmann with 6. Kompanie. Altogether we had about 70 men dug in here. The position was held despite heavy artillery fire and determined counter-attacks.'

Ridge. Although this failed to dislodge the enemy, the attack reached the shrine situated on the track some 200 metres south of the German position and parallel with the main road. Although the German MG34s again inflicted heavy losses, Hauptmann Ambrosius himself was now fighting a defensive battle and was not in a position to cross the main road. All he could do was maintain his small bridgehead in the hope of the division's overall attack being successful and reinforcements therefore arriving. II./Infanterie-Regiment 12 had, however, effectively driven a wedge between the 3rd Grenadiers and 2nd Coldstream. The situation for the 3rd Grenadiers, and indeed the defensive position of the 1st Guards Brigade, was critical as Leutnant Barthels' two MG34 machine-gun teams continued to dominate the battle.

The commanding officer of the 3rd Battalion Grenadier Guards, Major Allan Adair MC, went forward from Bailleul in a carrier, taking with him the commander of his reserve No. 3 Company, Captain Starkey. Consequently No. 3 Company was sent forward with orders not merely to link up with the 2nd Coldstream Guards but also to push the Germans back across the river.

At about 1130 hours, supported by a section of three carriers led by Lieutenant Reynell-Pack, Captain Starkey advanced from the Forming Up Position (FUP), leading his men towards the German position on Poplar Ridge. Amongst No. 3 Company's men was Guardsman W. Lewcock:

'From the start it was a suicidal attack as we advanced across the cornfield towards the wood in open formation. We were met with a hail of machine-gun bullets and in a short time there were the cries of the wounded and the dying. The Duke of Northumberland, who waved us on with his ash stick, was killed near me.'

The advance had started off well supported by mortar fire, but this ceased too early as it was wrongly believed that No. 3 Company was too close for safety to the exploding shells. Unfortunately Captain Starkey had no means of communicating with the mortar platoon and so his men were suddenly adrift in the corn, unsupported by heavier fire and in range of the German machine guns. Losses increased and Captain R. E. Abel Smith, No. 3 Company's second-in-command, also fell. According to the Grenadier Guards war diary 'the attack went in with great dash . . . but the men were mown down by hidden machine guns'.

Lieutenant Reynell-Pack then attempted to use his carriers as light tanks, but as the small tracked vehicles dashed forward towards Poplar Ridge his gunners were unable to bring their Brens to bear due to the rough ground. The carriers charged the Germans head-on; all were destroyed, the gallant Reynell-Pack being killed just 50 yards short of his objective.

Mont-St-Aubert dominated the landscape — then as now *(above)*. The village in the background is Leaucourt, from where the II. Bataillon launched its attack. Dilip Sarkar carried out a nostalgic pilgrimage to the area in October 1998 to see where his grandfather, Guardsman Bert Smith, had fought in 1940. (Andrew Long)

Although the dead, dying and wounded lay scattered all around, as indicated by the German battalion commander, the Grenadiers rallied and mounted several ad hoc counter-attacks. Given that the main thrust of the German attack had fallen upon No. 4 Company, Nos. 1 and 2 Companies, situated to the right, were able to hold firm. The open country held by these forward companies was still being observed from Mont-St-Aubert — any movement provoked a violent reaction from the enemy machine-guns and mortars situated on the east bank. These particular Grenadier companies were also subjected to fire from German snipers who had infiltrated the cornfield behind the Escaut. Captain Clifton of No. 1 Company organised an immediate counter-attack with his reserve platoon and some Guardsmen of Captain Radford-Norcop's No. 2 Company. The position formerly occupied by No. 4 Company was reached, but the Grenadiers were beaten back with further losses: Captain Clifton, Captain Radford-Norcop and Lieutenant The Master of Forbes were all wounded.

To the right of these Grenadier companies was the 2nd Battalion North Staffordshire Regiment, whose left flank the Germans also attacked. A counter-attack was mounted by the 2nd North Staffordshires, led by their Major F. G. Matthews, towards Poplar

On the morning of May 21, these engineers from Infanterie-Regiment 12 were pictured in the Esquelmes sector. (Peter Taghon)

Left: **The shrine to which the 2nd North Staffordshires' counter-attack penetrated. This stands on a track running parallel with the N50 Tournai-Pecq road which can be seen in the background. Poplar Ridge is 200 metres to the right (north).** *Right:* **Looking towards Poplar Ridge from the shrine. No. 3 Company advanced in open order across these fields. (Andrew Long)**

Hauptmann Ambrosius: 'A massive counter-attack took place which was preceded by a heavy artillery barrage. Suddenly three enemy tanks put in an appearance, followed by a whole English company. One of these was immediately eliminated, the crew killed. The other two were stopped between our dugouts and forced back together with the rest of the counter-attacking company. The tanks were engaged with rifle fire and anti-tank ammunition. Every man stood upright between the tanks driving here and there. Our men fired and threw stick grenades into the tanks. In this battle Leutnant Schlinke and his machine-gun team distinguished themselves.'

Guardsman Lewcock: 'Our numbers were dwindling rapidly and we started to take cover, unable to proceed due to our mounting losses. It was then that Harry Nicholls dashed forward.'

Guardsman Percy Nash: 'It was desperate. These German machine guns were unbelievable. Harry just turned to me and said "Come on Nash, follow me!" So I did. He had the Bren, firing from the hip, and I had my rifle. I fed Harry ammunition, and we attacked by means of short rushes forward. Harry was hit several times and hurt bad, but he wouldn't stop. He just kept on shouting "Come on Nash, they can't get me!" Once the enemy guns in the poplars were out of action we fired on Germans who were crossing the River Escaut. Harry said "Wait till they're half way across, then we'll sink 'em". I reckon we sank two boats, each containing about ten men, before Harry turned the Bren on other Germans located both sides of the canal. By then we were drawing a lot of small-arms fire ourselves.'

Hauptmann Ambrosius described the shattering effect that Lance Corporal Nicholls' gallant attack had on his position: 'This attack caused panic amongst the soldiers of our 5. and 6. Kompanie [on Poplar Ridge], many of which fled and jumped in the Escaut to escape. Oberleutnant Shrumpel and Leutnant Schlinke then rallied these men who held their position on the riverbank. After this attack we had no more machine guns operable and no more anti-tank ammunition. Indeed, by this time nearly all of our ammunition of all types was used up.'

The effect of Lance Corporal Nicholls' attack on the advance of II./Infanterie-Regiment 12 was extremely significant and changed the tactical situation in the locality. Ambrosius' assault force, of near-company strength, which had been well supported by several MG34s and light anti-tank weapons, had been digging in on Poplar Ridge where it threatened cohesion of the 1st Guards Brigade's defensive position. After the counter-attack, however, the II./Infanterie-Regiment 12 strength on Poplar Ridge had been reduced to that of a platoon, without machine guns and with little ammunition. The attack by Lance Corporal Nicholls therefore destroyed the momentum of the assault crossing, and wrested the initiative from the Germans.

Guardsman Lewcock: 'I met up with Harry Nicholls and Percy Nash in the corn. I could see that Harry was badly wounded but appeared just about conscious. At that moment a Lysander flew over and the enemy turned their attentions to it. This enabled the few of us left to drop behind a low bank at the back of the field. The CSM was almost in tears as he counted us: 39 alive out of over 100 men. I was the only one who insisted that Harry Nicholls was still alive, but Percy Nash took the opposite view.'

Hauptmann Ambrosius: 'After this attack the enemy resistance reduces. Some strong reconnaissance patrols are sent forward to follow up the enemy, in which manner we hope the entire area will eventually be cleared of the enemy. Our strength is now about 40 men. Approximately 60 prisoners have been taken, these men are Grenadier Guards — the best professional English soldiers. They are all 1.80 metre tall. The youngest have served six years, the oldest more like 18. In this situation the English have rarely used such elite regiments.'

Among the prisoners, in fact, was Lance Corporal Nicholls, discovered in the cornfield, just clinging on to life. After the Germans brought the badly wounded Nicholls out of the cornfield, it was Guardsman Smith who carried him and tended his wounds until more appropriate medical attention could be found.

The local tactical situation was now one of stalemate. About 40 Germans remained on Poplar Ridge but their strength along the west bank itself was unknown. From about 1300 hours, the 1st Guards Brigade decided to maintain the line along the main road; in the ditch there could be found men of the 3rd Grenadiers, 2nd Coldstream, 2nd Hampshire, and 2nd North Staffordshire Regiments.

British casualties near Esquelmes — precise location unknown. (Peter Taghon)

Dilip claims this to be the most amazing photograph — ever! These Grenadier prisoners were pictured beside the River Escaut on May 21, presumably during the lull which took place before No. 3 Company's counter-attack. The Guardsman at centre (fifth from left) is believed to be the author's grandfather. (Peter Taghon)

Contrary to previously published accounts, however, the enemy did not withdraw immediately after No. 3 Company's counter-attack, although given that certain German soldiers fled and jumped into the Escaut it is easy to understand this perception. 1st Guards Brigade's line remained along the main road, and no further attempts were made in daylight to recover the riverbank. II./Infanterie-Regiment 12, however, withdrew carefully during the late afternoon, leaving behind some 66 dead, and 133 German soldiers had been wounded.

A roll call indicated that the 3rd Grenadier casualties were also high: 47 Grenadiers had been killed, including five officers. Three more officers had been wounded and other-rank casualties amounted to 180 (this figure including those killed, missing and wounded). It was the regiment's first major engagement of the Second World War; the action was II./Infanterie-Regiment 12's first since having re-formed after the Polish campaign. For the Grenadier Guards, however, this battle carved a special place in the regimental history: Lance Corporal Nicholls would later receive the Victoria Cross for his 'signal act of valour'.

The surviving original section of the River Escaut, this being the bank along which No. 4 Company was deployed. Although the area has been re-landscaped, various pieces of shrapnel and an unfired .303 cartridge case were found.

Photographs of Lance Corporal Nicholls are rare; this is an enlargement from a No. 3 Company photograph, circa 1938, in which (then) Guardsman Harry Nicholls is holding his Army boxing trophies. Nicholls was from Nottingham and learned his boxing in the tough streets of the Meadows estate. He never fully recovered from the wounds he had received in 1940 and he died in 1975. (Christopher Collins)

Two days after the battle, the Germans crossed the River Escaut at Esquelmes in safety. (Peter Taghon)

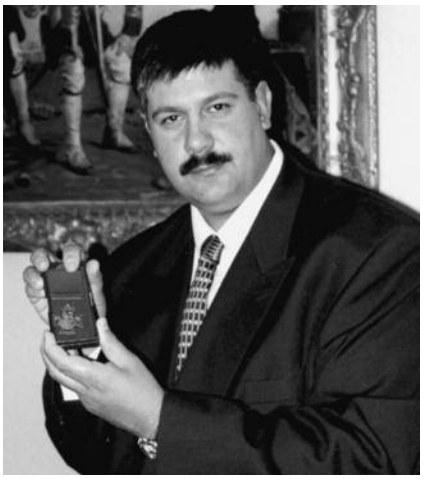
By late afternoon on May 21, headquarters of the German 6. Armee had decided, due to mounting and already heavy losses, to withdraw its forces from west of the Escaut and to shift the next attack, intended to surround Lille itself, to a new axis further north, via Courtrai and Ypres. The strongly held Escaut line would thus be outflanked. In what had essentially been a battle between infantry supported by artillery (but without armour engaged on either side), however, the BEF had successfully defended the Escaut line and therefore defeated the German river-crossing operations along the entire length of its front. Testimony to the bravery of British soldiers that day is the fact that two VCs would later be awarded: one to Lance Corporal Nicholls, the other to Company Sergeant Major George Gristock of the 2nd Battalion Royal Norfolk Regiment. This collective gallantry along the Escaut, together with the initial success of the armoured counter-attack at Arras, bought a valuable 48 hours. Consequently the BEF's options regarding withdrawing to the coast remained open.

On May 22, it was decided to withdraw to the Gort Line, this move being undertaken the following night. On May 23, therefore, the German 4. Armee was able to cross the Escaut in safety.

A week later, the 3rd Grenadiers were urgently sent to Comines; the 5th Division's line north of the town had broken. This was disastrous as, if the northern arm of the German pincer had pushed westwards from this point, the ports of Ostend and Dunkirk might have fallen and the BEF encircled. The 3rd Grenadiers fought a bitter battle for two days; afterwards their strength had been reduced to just nine officers and 270 other ranks. Although collectively the BEF had left behind around 1,000 dead at the Battle of the Ypres-Comines Canal, the importance of this line having held must again be emphasised.

On May 28, the 3rd Grenadiers were ordered to withdraw on Messines. By this time the decision had been taken to evacuate via Dunkirk. The remnants of the battalion reached the beach at Zuydcoote on May 31 (independently of the 1st Guards Brigade due to having reinforced the 5th Division at Comines) and embarked that night. For Major Adair's gallant survivors, the Battle of France was over. From the British viewpoint the Dunkirk evacuation was a great success: a stupendous achievement arising out of defeat.

However, the fate of many BEF soldiers would remain unknown for many weeks. On June 20, 1940, for example, the *Worcester News & Times* headlined 'Worcester Guardsman Missing', and reported that my grandfather, 2611042 Guardsman H. H. 'Bert' Smith had been missing in action since May 21. Lance Corporal Harry Nicholls, however, was posted 'Killed in Action' on the evidence of Guardsman Nash. On July 30, the award of a 'posthumous' VC to Lance Corporal Nicholls was announced in the *London Gazette*. On August 6, Mrs Connie Nicholls received the little bronze cross from King George VI. In September, however, news was received via the Red Cross that both Lance Corporal Nicholls and Guardsman Smith were actually alive but in German hands. Overjoyed, the Nicholls family returned the medal so that Harry himself would one day be able to receive it personally. This he did, in fact, on June 22, 1945, marking the only occasion since its inception in 1856 that the Victoria Cross has been 'awarded' twice. Sadly, however, Lance Corporal Nicholls, VC, was never to make a full recovery from his wounds and died at his home town of Nottingham in September 1975. His (now late) second wife, Mrs Grace Nicholls, made a gift to the regiment of his Victoria Cross, which is now preserved by the Grenadier Guards at Regimental Headquarters.



Dilip with Harry Nicholls' VC at the Regimental HQ of the Grenadier Guards in Wellington Barracks.

Left: **The bridge at Pecq, demolished by the Royal Engineers the night before the battle. Picture taken by the Germans on May 23. (Peter Taghon)** *Right:* **Unfortunately a direct comparison is impossible today due to construction of the small warehouse and because the river has been canalised and moved 100 metres to the east! (Andrew Long)**

My grandfather died in September 1983. He rarely spoke of his wartime experiences and it was not until his funeral that I first heard of Lance Corporal Nicholls. I completed some preliminary research, to satisfy the family's curiosity, and there the matter lay until my first visit to the battlefield, 14 years later. In July 1997, I took my wife, Anita, and children James and Hannah, to Belgium. We made what was little more than a short reconnaissance armed with a camera to the Esquelmes area, but the effect was stunning. Suddenly we were in the shadow of Mont-St-Aubert, and, as we pulled off the N50 (travelling north between Tournai and Pecq), the fields were full of yellow corn. The shrine, which the 2nd North Staffordshire counter-attack had reached, could be seen, as could Poplar Ridge itself and the barn used as No. 4 Company HQ.

Within the cornfields is the Esquelmes British War Cemetery, containing the graves of some 250 BEF soldiers, including most of the 3rd Battalion Grenadier Guards and 2nd Battalion North Staffordshire Regiment casualties suffered on May 21, 1940. We knew that my grandfather's friend, Guardsman Sam Hayes, had been killed alongside him; now I was standing next to his grave and the experience was profound. Clearly this was a forgotten battle, and Poplar Ridge itself — one of the most important Second World War sites in Belgium I would suggest — was in danger of being 'lost' forever. On that basis I resolved there and then to research and write the story.

In October 1998, together with fellow 'war pilgrims' Allan White, Andrew Long, Antony Whitehead, Peter Taghon and Bernard-Marie Dupont, I returned to Esquelmes and accurately plotted the battlefield. From photographs obtained by Peter from German sources we realised that the Escaut had, since 1945, been straightened, widened and moved some 100 metres east! Fortunately, however, a section of the original river remained, now a narrow pool, and by coincidence this was part of No. 4 Company's former position — i.e. where my grandfather had fought.

Despite torrential rain we managed to undertake a search of the area with metal detectors. Near the original river we found fragments of German shells, consistent with the bombardment of No. 4 Company's position, and, in front of Poplar Ridge, a quantity of mortar shrapnel (probably from the barrage preceding No. 3 Company's counter-attack), an unfired .303 cartridge case, and the screw cap from a British 'flimsy' (a fluid can). It is likely that the latter is from one of the three Grenadier Bren carriers destroyed in the counter-attack. Within Poplar Ridge itself (which are not now the original trees, but poplars planted on the same line about 25 years ago) is a marsh, this being consistent with Hauptmann Ambrosius' account. The weather conditions, however, prevented us from searching this thoroughly, but it appears that the area has been very well cleared. Nevertheless, it was poignant indeed to discover some tangible links with such august events involving my own grandfather.

My research indicates that whenever circumstances enabled it to stand and fight, the BEF gave an excellent account. I do not think that the BEF has ever received appropriate recognition for this, and its victories along both the River Escaut and Ypres-Comines Canal are today little known. Lance Corporal Nicholls, VC, and his comrades had certainly given the enemy something to think about, and it is entirely appropriate that the Grenadier Guards still annually celebrate 'Harry Nicholls Day'. As a result of this project, I will be lecturing to new recruits on the 3rd Grenadiers' part in this campaign; they need to know, for the Servicemen and women of today clearly have much to live up to.

Guardsman 'Bert' Smith, the author's mother's father, and the unwitting catalyst which inspired his book. This picture was taken in May 1945, upon repatriation (he was then aged 37 years). Smith and Nicholls were together throughout their five years of captivity which was spent largely in Stalag XXB.

Dilip Sarkar, a serving police officer in Worcestershire, overlooks the battlefield from the former German observation post on Mont-St-Aubert (see map page 32). *Guards VC: Blitzkrieg 1940* is his ninth book and his first dealing with a land battle, all his previous works being aviation orientated. (Andrew Long)

Extracted from Guards VC: Blitzkrieg 1940 *by Dilip Sarkar and published by Ramrod Publications, (254 pages, casebound with over 100 photographs and eight maps, £19.95, ISBN: 0 9519832 6 1). Available via all bookshops or direct from the publisher at 16 Kingfisher Close, St Peter's, Worcester WR5 3RY, Tel: 01905 767735, Fax: 01905 424533.*

Left: **The Grenadier plot at Esquelmes British War Cemetery. At the time of the battle, the river actually ran through the rough ground beyond the cemetery, this being No. 2 Company's position. Included in the graves seen here are also men of the 2nd North Staffordshire Regiment, including Major F. G. Matthews who led the ill-fated counter-attack towards the shrine. Matthews was recommended for, but did not receive, a VC on the basis that his attack prevented the Germans from penetrating further than the main road and forced them into a defensive, rather than offensive, action. Also buried here is Lieutenant The 9th Duke of Northumberland, a Grenadier officer killed in No. 3 Company's counter-attack.** *Right:* **Hannah and James Sarkar pictured with the grave of their great-grandfather's friend, Guardsman Sam Hayes. The discovery of this grave was a profound moment for the author which largely inspired him to publish his latest book.**

SONIA'S DUBOK

By John Howland

The first inkling Britain's counter-intelligence services (MI5) had of the Soviet military intelligence (GRU) high-ranking spy code-named 'Sonia' was in 1945 when GRU officer Alexander Foote, a Briton, defected back to the West.

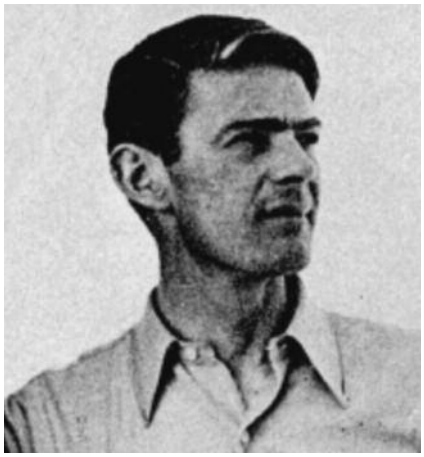
But the finer stitching in this particular espionage tapestry, and her final unmasking, came only in 1950 when MI5 read the detailed prison cell confession of Klaus Fuchs, a prominent émigré scientist who, during and after the war, had betrayed many of Britain's atomic bomb secrets to the Soviets. Much to their undoubted chagrin, counter-intelligence experts realised too late that 'Sonia' (who had been Fuchs' Oxford handler) had just before flown the coup to the Iron Curtain safety of East Germany.

Sonia's Oxford 'interlude' began before the war in Switzerland. In late 1939, while working with the remarkably successful Geneva-based Communist group, the 'Lucy' ring, orders came to prepare for an important task in England, where without protective diplomatic cover, Sonia would be operating as an 'illegal' — alone, and liable to the full force of the law if discovered.

Sonia set out for Oxford on December 18, 1940, travelling by way of Barcelona, Madrid and Lisbon, arriving in early 1941. By February, she was lodging in the rectory at Glympton, a hamlet bordering the Blenheim Palace Estate, just north of Woodstock and some seven miles north of Oxford. The rector, Reverend Cox, had no reason to doubt Sonia's cover story about being a refugee, fleeing Nazi persecution in Europe, nor did he have any reason to suspect that his paying guest, with whom he and his wife played cards in the evenings, was anything other than 'Mrs Brewer'. In fact, the raven-haired 34-year-old with the 'attractive figure and even better legs' (as Alexander Foote, her former Geneva colleague, remembers her) was GRU Colonel Ursula Kuczynski — a distinguished, experienced and highly decorated professional spy twice awarded one of Russia's highest decorations, the Order of the Red Banner.

Her Soviet controllers had smoothed her entry into Britain by having her marry her then lover Leon Beurton (aka Len Brewer or John Miller), a British citizen and 'Lucy' ring member. Her husband, she told the Reverend Cox, was for the time being unable to leave Geneva. (Leon joined her in 1942 on false papers supplied by MI6!)

In her memoirs first published in Germany in 1977, Sonia recalls her Glympton sojourn. It was here in her room at the rectory that she built her clandestine radio transmitter. Once it had been assembled, she had to find securer surroundings from which to transmit. The ability to surreptitiously erect the transmitter's aerial was vital, but impossible, at the rectory. Had her activities been discovered during the time of Russia's Non-Aggression Pact with Nazi Germany, because of her British citizenship she would undoubtedly have gone to the gallows. Though an enemy of Britain, her loyal devotion to Stalinism has to be admired.



Left: **Leon Beurton, a member of the Geneva-based Soviet 'Lucy' spy ring, married Ursula Kuczynski** *(above right),* **code-named 'Sonia', so that his British citizenship would help her entry into Britain early in 1941 under her cover story of being a refugee fleeing from Europe. Sonia rented a room in the rectory in Glympton** *(right),* **a small village near Blenheim Palace which had become the out-of-town HQ of MI5 in 1940 (see *After the Battle* No. 11).**

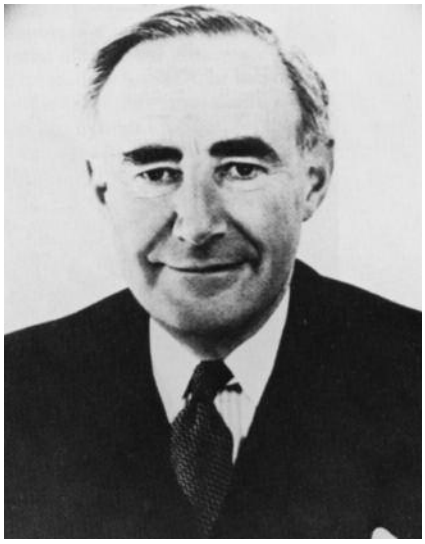
Before moving into the rectory, Sonia lived with her father at 224 Headington Road, Oxford — the fourth semi from the left. (Unfortunately, the rectory is out of bounds to photographers in view of the security precautions of its present occupier.)

Sonia's first dead-letter drop — in Soviet terminology, a 'dubok' — after she moved from the rectory to a bungalow in Kidlington was here at a spot three miles to the north on the main Oxford to Banbury road.

Just as soon as she had been naturalised by marriage, she obtained her British passport from the British Consulate in Geneva in May 1940, the same month, co-incidentally, as MI5 acquired accommodation at Blenheim Palace for its wartime operations.

Today, we know considerably more about Ursula Kuczynski. She was born in Berlin to German-Jewish parents (probably of Polish origins) in 1907 and by the 1930s her entire family had become committed to the Communist cause. Her brother, Jürgen, and sister, Brigitte, played major roles in Soviet-backed, European spy rings. Her father, Rene, was an eminent economist (also on the GRU payroll) teaching at the London School of Economics and at Oxford University. The War Cabinet sought out his considerable expertise on matters of economic strategy, making him privy to all manner of politically sensitive information and Cabinet gossip, all of which he promptly betrayed to Moscow. He rented rooms at 224 Headington Road in Oxford. She joined him there for a few days on her arrival in England, and prior to her moving to Glympton, to arrange her longer-term accommodation plans.

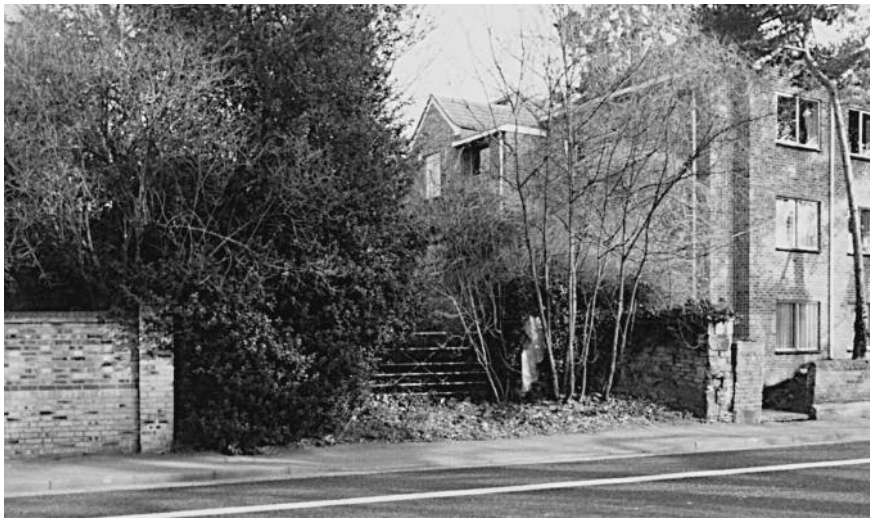
Throughout 1941 and well into 1942, Sonia's 'music box' — as the GRU called radio transmitters — was always busy. Curiously, all this occurred before Fuchs' arrival in Britain but simultaneously with the work pattern at MI5's Blenheim Palace out-station of Roger Hollis, the man who years later would be suspected of having been a long-time Soviet mole, but who then (a year after his death in 1973) was cleared by a British government investigation. However, dissident MI5 officers have consistently ignored the official party line that Hollis was not a Soviet mole.



Roger Hollis — the wartime chief of MI5's 'F' Division and its Communist sub-section — has long been suspected of being a Soviet agent. Whatever the truth, evidence of the existence of a spy — code-named 'Elli' — at the Oxford HQ surfaced after the war, and our author, John Howland, believes that Sonia was the go-between.

Sonia moved out of Glympton rectory in 1941 renting a furnished bungalow in Kidlington, a 'dormitory' village three miles north of Oxford, where she remained until 1942. Her GRU London controller, code-name 'Sergei', was Simon Kremer who was the secretary of the Military Attaché at the Soviet Embassy. He returned to Russia at the end of 1941. 'Sergei' remained the cover name for Sonia's controllers, though the face changed from time to time. Klaus Fuchs knew Kremer as 'Alexander'. It was always to a 'Sergei' that she passed those documents needing the services of a courier or the diplomatic bag to Moscow.

In 1942 she rented Avenue Cottage at 50 George Street (since re-named Middle Way) in north Oxford's Summertown district — from Neville Laski, brother of Harold Laski, the then leader of the Labour Party. Though Avenue Cottage was within the grounds of a huge Victorian house called 'The Avenue', at 302 Woodstock Road, the cottage's postal address was George Street. Today, little remains of Avenue Cottage or of The Avenue, the only clue to their whereabouts being the overgrown and bramble-covered gate pillars facing Woodstock Road, close to St Edward's School.



In 1942 Sonia moved to Avenue Cottage in the grounds of The Avenue at 302 Woodstock Road in the Summertown district of Oxford. Today, only the crumbling, ivy-covered pillars remain to mark yet another house with clandestine connections.

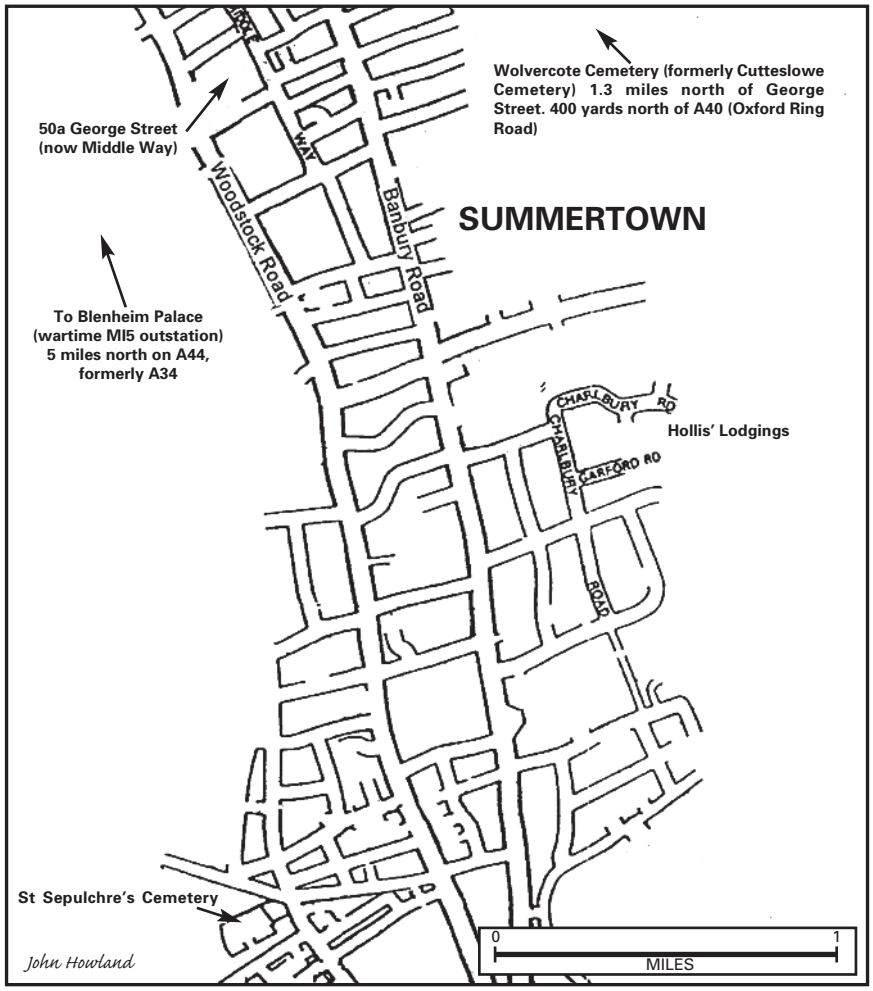
By late 1942, Sonia was 'running' the notorious atom-bomb spy, Klaus Fuchs. It had been to her brother, Jürgen (another skilled GRU agent), that Fuchs had first declared his willingness to betray the West's atomic secrets.

Sonia's eventual unmasking began with the defection of 'Lucy' ring member Alexander Foote who had been recruited to the GRU in London by her sister, Brigitte. Foote defected in Berlin in 1947 while en route to the United States, and cooperated fully with MI5's interrogators, who helped his confession along with an offer to get him a quiet position in a government department. Consequently, in late August 1947, MI5 traced Sonia and Leon to The Firs, a house in Great Rollright, near Chipping Norton in Oxfordshire.

Her part in the haemorrhage of the West's atomic secrets was only fully realised with the revelations in Klaus Fuchs' statement to British counter-intelligence at the start of his 14-year sentence for spying in 1950. Fuchs told everything he knew about his Soviet spymasters and his Oxford controller — Sonia. Too late for MI5 though, for she and Leon were already behind the Iron Curtain.

The first suggestions of MI5's penetration had surfaced in Ottawa in 1945, when a young Soviet GRU officer, Igor Gouzenko, defected to the Canadians with 109 top-secret documents as collateral. Gouzenko told MI5 that in 1942, while he had been working in the GRU's Moscow code-room on Krapanskoya Boulevard, his friend, Lieutenant Lubimov, had shown him messages from an agent, code-named 'Elli'. Lubimov, Gouzenko went on, told him that Elli was of such importance that he was only contactable through secret, dead-letter drops — or 'duboks' — as GRU slang has it. Gouzenko further claimed that Lubimov told him that Elli's dubok was 'a split in a tomb of someone called Brown'. He explained to his MI5 debriefers that whoever Elli was, he or she had unlimited access to MI5's Registry files, and was able to remove them at will, even to working on them at home.

With MI5's Registry located at Blenheim Palace, Elli, MI5's mole-hunters felt sure, had to be Oxford-based. In later years, they whittled the list of suspects best fitting Gouzenko's Elli down to one man: Roger Hollis, who at the time had been Acting Director of 'F' Division, and also head of 'F2' (the Communist sub-section). But there was a factor working in Hollis' favour. Gouzenko mentioned there was 'something Russian in Elli's background', but exactly what that was he could not explain. MI5's mole-hunters delved into Hollis' past antecedents but there was nothing remotely of the kind.



John's plan showing the relationship between the MI5 headquarters at Blenheim Palace, Roger Hollis' lodgings in Charlbury and Garford Roads, Sonia's Avenue Cottage — the formal address for the latter being 50 George Street just round the corner from Woodstock Road — and the two cemeteries.

During the debriefing of the former Soviet GRU officer, Igor Gouzenko, who defected to the Canadians in 1945, MI5 learned that Elli's dubok was 'a split in a tomb of someone called Brown'. There are two cemeteries which existed at Oxford during the war and both contain graves with the common surname Brown. *Left:* **St Sepulchre's was favoured by British spy sleuth Chapman Pincher in his book *Too Secret Too Long* published in 1984. Emily Browne's grave lies here** *(right).*

However, Hollis' background held a series of hard-to-ignore co-incidences. In the 1930s, he had worked for the British-American Tobacco Company in Shanghai at the same time as Sonia was there spying for the Soviets. Both were friendly with Agnes Smedley, a known Communist and agent recruiter. Whether Hollis and Sonia ever met through her remains uncertain, but the balance of probabilities suggests they did. Curiously, Sonia's memoirs indicate she was not averse to the idea of using sex for agent recruitment, nor of using it to sustain an agent once recruited. Hollis and Sonia were also simultaneously in Switzerland; she spying for the 'Lucy' ring, he recuperating in a sanatorium from TB. Again, co-incidentally or not, while Hollis was working at Blenheim Palace, he rented accommodation at addresses in Garford Road and Charlbury Road, both just off north Oxford's Banbury Road, both addresses being not a mile from George Street where Sonia had her clandestine radio station. Roger Hollis, a career officer, went on to become MI5's Director-General, receiving a knighthood along the way.

In later years, Sonia vehemently denied any knowledge of or association with Hollis, though, as some MI5 officers point out, the GRU would never allow her to admit it even if it was true. Why should they help Britain's intelligence services to prove anything about Hollis?

In 1984, spy writer Chapman Pincher claimed he had found Elli's dubok while researching his blockbuster exposé of the Soviet's penetration of Britain, *Too Secret Too Long.* Pincher wrote that 'the general size of the City of Oxford would suggest that there must have been several graveyards in the area, but investigations carried out on my behalf by my son who is a professional researcher, showed there is only one, and this was the case in the war years. The graveyard is called St Sepulchre's Cemetery, situated off Walton Street.'

In Chapter 11 he describes how Emily Browne's grave (rather than 'tomb') in St Sepulchre's Cemetery appears to fit the bill. But for once, Pincher's usually immaculate research is seriously flawed. And on two counts.

Firstly, St Sepulchre's was not the only operational cemetery close to where Sonia and Hollis were living during the war years. There was also Wolvercote Cemetery (then known as Cutteslowe Cemetery), situated on the city's northern boundary, alongside the main Oxford to Banbury road. Moreover, the latter cemetery is easily reachable by bicycle from Kidlington (where Sonia was residing in 1941-42) and just over a mile from Avenue Cottage where she lived between 1942-45.

Secondly, St Sepulchre's Cemetery, situated in the city centre suburb of Jericho, is *not* en route between Blenheim and Hollis' north-Oxford lodgings. Pincher writes that Kidlington was 'half way between Blenheim Palace and Oxford and ideally placed for servicing a spy inside MI5, especially one who could call at a convenient dead-letter box *on the way home* (my emphasis) from Oxford'. However, St Sepulchre's Cemetery is by no stretch of the imagination 'on the way home', it being close to the city centre and almost a mile south from where Hollis was living at the time. But Wolvercote Cemetery fits the bill precisely.

Jericho in the 1940s was a rough, tough, working-class district of terraced housing, not the place in which even a head of an MI5 department would leave a car unattended for any time. It is a matter of record that Hollis drove to and from Blenheim Palace in his own car. (Other staff, save for section heads, took the MI5 bus.) Since St Sepulchre's has no vehicular access, Hollis would have had to have left his car close to the cemetery's Walton Street entrance and walked. Indeed, in closely-knit Jericho, well-dressed strangers such as Sonia or Hollis, would have been conspicuous, whereas in north-Oxford's more affluent, cosmopolitan, middle-class suburbs they would have been less obtrusive.

However, John Howland's research indicates that a much more plausible location is Wolvercote Cemetery which was far more suitable for an agent based at MI5 as well as being better placed for Sonia. Even more significant are two graves — a 'Brown' and 'Browne', situated on either side of the path — 'the split', John believes, referred to by Gouzenko. And what better place to leave a message or package than a conveniently placed park bench?

Wolvercote Cemetery being en route from Blenheim Palace to Oxford is — and was then — easily accessible by car as the gates had to be wide enough to allow access to motor hearses. Hollis would have found little difficulty parking in the cemetery grounds or in adjacent Five Mile Drive, one of the city's more affluent avenues. At the centre of the cemetery is the chapel with enough room alongside for the parking of several cars. Four pathways radiate from the chapel, one running north-east. Not 20 yards along it, on its west side, is a park bench, immediately in front of which, on the path's eastern side, is a grave bearing a tall, distinct, Celtic Cross. The name on the headstone is 'Brown'. Immediately behind the bench is a less-conspicuous grave. Its headstone also bears the name 'Browne'. (Note the different spellings.)

Marks on the headstone of the Browne grave suggest that a smaller stone or something similar once stood at its base, ideal (as Pincher writes, referring of course to the St Sepulchre grave) for concealing small packages. But, if one interprets Lubimov's 'split' (in a tomb of someone called Brown) metaphorically, the position of the dead-letter drop is precise.

When the pathway separating the two graves is seen as being Lubimov's 'split', it is the *park bench* and not either of the two graves that becomes the dubok. This particular seat, cemetery manager Hugh Dawson says, dates from before 1940. Neither is it co-incidental that park benches are favoured dead-letter drops. Indeed, because Hollis and Sonia probably knew one another from their time in China together, the park bench was probably not a dubok in the conventional sense. The bench is clearly visible from and close to any car parked on the north-eastern side of the chapel. At a pre-arranged time, either one or the other would wait, sitting on the bench, make the 'drop' as the other approached, then walk away leaving the message for the other to immediately collect. There would be no physical contact nor sign of recognition to the casual observer.

So, it seems well possible that it was at this simple bench, in what is now Wolvercote Cemetery, that some of the greatest secrets of the war and possibly the atomic age were betrayed.

The seat showing both graves — the Celtic cross on the extreme right and the headstone behind. Was this the place where some of Britain's greatest secrets were passed to the Soviets?

Sonia's cover was broken when Alexander Foote, recruited to the NKVD in 1937 while serving in the International Brigade in Spain and later earmarked to be Sonia's 'husband', defected from the GRU in 1947. (He had refused to wed Sonia, leaving her to marry for love, not convenience.) He revealed that a former Soviet spy was still at large in Britain and MI5 traced Sonia to Great Rollright *(left),* **a small village in the north of Oxfordshire.** *Right:* **She was living with Leon in The Firs to where she had moved after leaving The Avenue at the end of the war.**

In 1943, Hollis returned to London, though Sonia stayed put in Avenue Cottage. Her next assignment was the atom-bomb scientist, Klaus Fuchs. For over two years, Fuchs passed her atomic secrets at covert meetings in and around the north-Oxfordshire town of Banbury.

So what of the cemetery dubok? It seems likely it continued in use by her, if not to meet with Fuchs, then as a rendezvous with her Soviet Embassy controller 'Sergei'. Sonia remarks in her memoirs that she met him near to where the A40 and A34 roads meet. This point is Oxford's Woodstock Road roundabout, just 400 yards from Wolvercote Cemetery.

When the war ended in 1945, Sonia vacated Avenue Cottage moving to The Firs in the north Oxfordshire village of Great Rollright. Then, with the discovery of British atom spy Allan Nunn May, the GRU apparently broke off further contact with her. However, she 're-activated' Fuchs in 1946 while he was working at the Atomic Research Establishment at Harwell, south of Oxford.

But it was Alexander Foote's defection from the GRU in 1947 that blew Sonia's cover. He told MI5 about a former Soviet spy still living in England, and in late August MI5 traced her to Great Rollright, sending two officers along with the local CID to interview her in September on the pretext of a bigamous marriage. Slowly, they broached the subject of Foote's spy allegations, not realising she was already relaying Fuchs atomic secrets. She made them tea. Listening intently, she realised from their inept questioning that they could pin little on her without a confession. But, even so, she knew that her spying days were over. The interrogation, she thought, was an elaborate coded warning for her and Leon to get out while there was still time. MI5 never got another chance. Soon afterwards, in February 1950, she and Leon left for East Germany never to return.

The MI5 officer responsible for arranging the Great Rollright interrogation was Roger Hollis. In the early 1980s, the Thatcher administration released details of MI5's ultra-secret investigation in 1974 into the Hollis allegations — the so-called 'Hollis Affair'. Though Lord Trend's report found insufficient *positive* evidence of Hollis' guilt, significantly, several well-placed MI5 officers felt it *failed to prove* his innocence either. Officially, Hollis was cleared. (He had died in 1973.)

As to the 'something Russian' in Elli's background, Chapman Pincher made a remarkable discovery in 1982. He found in several books, written by Hollis' elder brother Christopher, that the Hollis family had long believed they were related to Russia's Peter the Great!

Ursula Kuczinsky still lives with her husband in Berlin today. Her espionage work had saved the Soviets' atomic weapons programme an estimated seven years of research and untold millions of roubles. Alexander Foote took a quiet post at the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. He died on August 1, 1956. Klaus Fuchs was released in June 1959, having served nine of his 14-years' sentence. He moved to East Germany where he died in 1988. Igor Gouzenko, the man whose defection and revelations arguably started the Cold War, died in Canada in 1982, aged 63, apparently from natural causes. From the time of his defection and for the remainder of his life, he lived in constant terror of KGB revenge. His final resting place remains a closely guarded secret, save that his grave bears the name . . . Brown.

Sonia pictured with Leon following her defection into East Germany in 1950.

TEESSIDE DORNIER: JANUARY 1942

By Bill Norman

A Second World War German Dornier 217E-4 bomber which had crashed 55 years earlier was 're-discovered' at South Bank, Cleveland (the wartime county of Yorkshire), on November 26, 1997. The first pieces of wreckage were found just below the surface by Northumbrian Water Board workers laying sewers for a business park development. Following the discovery, full excavation of the site was undertaken by a team of Royal Engineers working with specialists from No. 5131 Bomb Disposal Squadron from RAF Wittering.

The aircraft, subsequently identified by makers' plates as Werk Nr. 5314, (U5+HS) belonged to 8./KG2 (Holzhammer) and was based at Schiphol (Amsterdam). It crashed in the early evening of January 15, 1942 after being damaged by anti-aircraft fire from a merchant ship before colliding with a barrage balloon on the banks of the River Tees.

Barrage balloons were an integral part of Britain's air defences during the war and Teesside had its fair share. Forty-eight of the hydrogen-filled gas bags — 62 feet long and 25 feet in diameter — were dotted around the area (including the ICI complex at Billingham) in a random pattern and they were usually flown between 4,000 - 5,000 feet. The prime purpose of these 'flying elephants' was not to bring down raiders but to keep enemy aircraft at altitudes which made accurate bombing difficult while also flying at heights which allowed better targets for anti-aircraft defences and home-based fighter aircraft.

Late on the afternoon of January 15, 1942, 15 German aircraft approached the north-east coast of England. Six aircraft flew inland and bombs were dropped at several places in Northumberland, Durham and Yorkshire. Around 6 p.m., one particular aircraft, a Dornier Do217-4E of the 8. Staffel of Kampfgeschwader 2, which had taken off from Schiphol aerodrome in Holland, attacked the steamer *Empire Bay* anchored off the River Tees. The vessel sank but not before its anti-aircraft guns inflicted at least some damage on the enemy aircraft. The Dornier had dropped bombs on Eston Jetty and the steelworks of Teesside, before it struck the cable of one of the many barrage balloons protecting the heavily industrialised area. (These pictures are believed to show No. 15 Balloon Centre at Billingham.) The collision ripped part of one wing from the aircraft, which crashed at South Bank close to the steelworks in the heart of Teesside. (Bill Norman Collection)

Not much to show for a 15-ton bomber after it smashed to pieces in the marshalling yard at South Bank. The four-man crew perished but only three bodies were recovered and later buried in the cemetery in Acklam Road, Thornaby. (Bill Norman Collection)

However, there were times when aircraft did stray into balloon cordons: sometimes they were lucky; sometimes they were not. Any aircrew finding itself in such a predicament, particularly in darkness, was in a potentially very dangerous situation because collision with the cable would invariably stop the aircraft dead in its tracks. Of course, the Germans were aware of this and thus it was most unusual for any low-flying raiders to approach barrage balloon areas in darkness. Whenever bombers attacked Teesside, which was usually at night, they generally flew at heights exceeding 5,000 feet. However, the occurrence on January 15, 1942, was to prove a costly exception to the rule.

On that day Netherlands-based bombers of Kampfgeschwader 2 were detailed to launch a late-afternoon attack against shipping and port installations along England's eastern seaboard. An estimated force of 12 enemy aircraft were in the vicinity of the Tees balloon cordon between 5.34 p.m. and 6.58 p.m. and among them was U5+HS of 8. Staffel crewed by Feldwebel Joachim Lehnis (pilot), Leutnant Rudolf Matern (observer/ bombardier), Unteroffizier Hans Maneke (radio-operator), and Oberfeldwebel Heinrich Richter (gunner).

Feldwebel Lehnis had been ordered to attack a convoy which was travelling eastwards of Middlesbrough but it is believed that he may also have dropped two bombs on Skinningrove Ironworks (on the North Yorkshire coast) at about 5.30 p.m. and one bomb on Teesside's Eston Jetty at about 5.55 p.m. before dive-bombing the coaster *Empire Bay* (2824 GRT), which was anchored off the port of Hartlepool.

The reason why *Empire Bay* was in such an exposed location was due to the fact that Hartlepool was a tidal port and sea-going traffic could use it only when the tide permitted. Furthermore, such traffic could sail in and out only during daylight hours: nighttime use was prohibited because lights were forbidden by the black-out regulations. Thus the steamer had left port but was waiting to join a south-bound convoy which was approaching from the north. In the late afternoon, *Empire Bay* was in a potentially dangerous situation for any merchant vessel in wartime: it was sitting at anchor alone and in daylight, without the protection a convoy might offer, and prey to any marauding enemy bomber — but there was little option.

Empire Bay had been waiting off Hartlepool for some time when the ship's crew heard the wail of the town's siren which, according to Chief Steward John Cavanagh, was 'the only indication that a raid was a possibility'. Shortly afterwards, the members of the crew were called to action stations but it was some time before they heard the dull drone of engines approaching from the south-west. John Cavanagh was manning the twin-Lewis gun on the port side of the bridge:

'We heard the plane and it was not long before we saw it approaching from the south-west and diving towards us from the landward side. I wanted to start shooting there and then but the captain, a veteran of the Dover Patrol in the First War, kept shouting: "Guns, hold your fire! Hold your fire!" The

On October 13, 1998, former KG2 pilot Heinz Möllenbrok pays tribute to his fallen comrades: Feldwebel Joachim Lehnis, the pilot; Leutnant Rudolf Matern, observer/ bombardier; Oberfeldwebel Heinrich Richter, the gunner. The fourth crewman, the radio-operator Unteroffizier Hans Maneke, remained missing in action. (Bill Norman)

The priorities of war dictated that the railway be reopened with alacrity. Technical Intelligence Report 5/114 dated January 16, 1942 states: 'There is little wreckage above ground and most of this is burnt, and as the aircraft dived into an important double-track railway, which is needed immediately for work of national importance, it is impossible to excavate the wreckage'. The report goes on to describe the armament found at the time and notes that 'this aircraft was the first Do217-E4 lost in action'. (Bill Norman)

plane was getting bigger with the passing of every second as it flew towards us. I thought that it was going to hit us before we got the chance to fire. I think I'd have emptied my pan of ammunition before he'd reached us, had it been left to me. But, as it turned out, the captain knew what he was doing.'

John estimates that the Dornier was some 200 feet high when it flashed low across the *Empire Bay* and dropped a number of bombs.

'It was so vivid. I could actually see the Germans in the plane. Then we saw the bombs dropping and I fired about a 15-second burst at him as five or six bombs straddled the ship. I don't recall the aircraft strafing us. It might have done, but in the excitement and confusion — the twin-Lewis made quite a racket and there was the explosion of bombs and huge fountains of water — who knows? Anyway, he broke away and started going back towards the land: by then he was losing height and trailing a plume of black smoke.'

Minutes later, the Dornier collided with a balloon cable above the Tees jetties and shortly afterwards the crushed remnants of the bomber's tangled wreckage were blazing ferociously on the railway sidings of the steelworks of Dorman, Long & Co., about 100 yards east of what is now South Bank railway station, on the LNER Darlington-Saltburn line.

Some time after the event, the airman in charge of No. 35 Tees Barrage Balloon Site explained what had happened:

'It was just getting dark when we got orders to fly our balloon. In a few minutes she was off the bed and aloft. We were rather pleased with ourselves, the boys and me, for we had put it up in extra quick time. I remember saying to one of our blokes, "If we don't get Annie up soon we'll probably be too late". I was only joking, really, because we had put our Annie up scores of times before without even hearing an enemy plane.

'Well, when she was up we trooped back to our hut, leaving the duty picquet on guard. We'd just started listening to the radio when we heard the plane coming low — very low, it was; much too low for my liking — so we decided to go outside and get a bit of cover. We'd no sooner got outside than the noise of the plane changed to a whine. It seemed as if it was diving right on top of us.

"Jenny Macke!" says one of our airmen, an Irishman who says things like that when he's roused. "Jenny Macke!" he says, "he's going to machine-gun us".

"No he isn't", says I. "He's going to hit the cable". And he did. He went smack into it. There was a crash and the winch jumped as she took the strain. The cable sawed through the wing like a grocer's wire goes through cheese. That fixed him. Off came the best part of the starboard wing and we knew we'd got him.'

The nine-foot section of severed wing fell into an adjacent balloon site: the Dornier was destined not to travel much further.

Mr C. V. Evans, warden of Grangetown Boys' Club, was in South Bank at the time and heard the plane travelling 'very low and very fast'. When it collided with the cable there was a yellow flash and the engine note immediately changed. His first thought was that South Bank was going to be dive-bombed, but he was mistaken. Clearly out of control, the Dornier came screaming low over the housetops and then plunged into the coal sidings at Clay Lane, South Bank. It crashed with a thunderous roar and in a sheet of flame which momentarily turned night into day. Then it began to burn like a Brock's Benefit, its supply of Very cartridges popping off and arching skywards in a macabre fireworks' display. Instinctively, Evans ran towards the blazing wreck, but the heat was so intense that he could not get near. In any case, his was a futile gesture: the fliers were already beyond help

The crash site was examined the next day by Air Ministry investigators, who subsequently reported that the bomber had crashed at 1810 hours. Seemingly, there was very little wreckage above the ground and most of that was burnt. Thus the investigators decided not to fully excavate the crater, largely because the aircraft had dived on to an important double-track railway siding 'which was needed immediately for work of national importance', but they did retrieve one 13mm machine gun as well as ammunition for 15mm and 20mm calibre weapons before the hole was filled in and new track laid. Three badly burned corpses were also recovered from the wreck and were subsequently buried at the Acklam Road Cemetery, Thornaby, under the names of Joachim Lehnis, Rudolf Matern and Heinrich Richter. The body of the fourth member, believed at the time to be that of wireless operator Hans Maneke, was not found.

Fifty-six years on, John Cavanagh could not remember whether the bombs had actually hit his ship but he believes that they certainly exploded close enough to rupture the sides of the vessel. The damage would eventually sink her, but that final event was destined to take some hours. *Empire Bay* settled first by the stern, the raised bow held high by the anchor chain, and hung there for quite a while until the increasing weight of water within the hull finally began to ease the ship below the waves. As evening wore on it became increasingly clear that there could be only one outcome. At 7.30 p.m., as the balloon crew set about their task of replacing their charge, the Tees pilot cutter *W.R. Lister* slipped her moorings to answer an urgent appeal for assistance from the crippled steamer. Following a magnificent rescue effort in heavy seas, all those on the *Empire Bay* were taken aboard — one of the most notable rescue feats by the Tees' pilots during the war.

Today, the sidings and steelworks of South Bank have long since gone and the once-bustling railway hotel is now a mere shell. Here the Dornier remained hidden from view until November 26, 1997 when contractors laying a new sewer in the now derelict part of the town destined to become a new business park struck the long-forgotten aircraft. As a JCB dug deep into the Middlesbrough clay a quantity of ammunition and a machine gun were brought to the surface. (Bill Norman)

Following the 're-discovery' of the wreck in November 1997, a full excavation of the site ultimately yielded some five tons of wreckage, including a large quantity of small-arms ammunition, a number of machine guns, two parachutes in surprisingly good condition, a wooden propeller, parts of undercarriage (oleo legs and wheel) and parts of fuselage. The discovery of fragments of a military uniform and a small number of human bones quite early in the investigation gave rise to the belief that the fourth member of the crew had been in the Dornier when it crashed, but at the time of the discovery it was not certain that the remains were those of Hans Maneke.

The doubt was resolved later, when other ('substantial') human remains were unearthed much deeper in the excavation and close by what would have been the ventral gunner's position. The discovery of part of a Luftwaffe battledress blouse bearing the collar insignia of three eagles near the remains led investigators to speculate that the remains were those of the pilot, Feldwebel Joachim Lehnis. However, subsequent forensic examination revealed that a fourth eagle was missing from the badge of rank. A coroner's inquest held on Teesside in June 1998 therefore concluded that the remains were those of ventral gunner Oberfeldwebel Heinrich Richter and pointed to a confusion of identities half a century ago, Maneke having been buried under Richter's name in 1942. That error was corrected on October 13, 1998, when Hans Maneke's grave was marked with a new headstone and that of Richter was removed pending its relocation over the new grave.

The following day, Heinrich Richter was buried alongside his comrades at Thornaby during a ceremony attended by the German Consul-General to Britain, the German Air Attaché, three local mayors, the representatives of 22 ex-Serviceman's associations and some 200 members of the general public. Attempts by the German authorities to trace surviving relatives of Richter and Maneke had met with no success but among those present was Heinz Möllenbrok, a former Dornier 17 pilot of KG2 who had been shot down during the Battle of Britain (see *After the Battle* No. 70), and who had travelled from Germany to represent the KG2 Association. He laid the first wreath.

Late that afternoon, the Joint Service EOD Operations Centre tasked No. 5131 (BD) Squadron, responsible for dealing with all crashed aircraft in the UK, with the job of clearing the site. Initially, a team from the squadron's permanent detachment at Goswick Sands, Berwick on Tweed, was dispatched, but it rapidly became apparent that excavating the wreckage and completing a full clearance of tons of thick wet clay would take a lot of men and a lot of machinery. The Goswick Sands team was quickly reinforced with another from the Braid Fell Detachment (Stranraer) and later from the Theddlethorpe Detachment. At the peak, 22 EOD personnel were on site. The plant expertise was provided by the Royal Engineers from No. 33 (EOD) Regiment at Wimbish. Arriving on Friday, November 28, their convoy of several large excavators was particularly impressive arriving with a police escort through the centre of Middlesbrough. Media interest was intense with the day's events being covered live on national TV lunch-time news, and again in the evening. The following day, the remains of the missing aircrew member were uncovered.

The number of local people who attended the burial ceremony and the church service that preceded it made a distinct impression on Heinz Möllenbrok and on Hans Mondorf, the German Consul-General. Addressing the funeral congregation at St Peter's Church, South Bank (the nearest church to the crash site), Herr Mondorf said: 'I was quite moved and surprised by the sympathy that this case attracted with the population here. I have travelled very long distances in Europe. It is not uncommon still to have hatred towards former enemies, especially towards Germans. This is understandable, particularly in countries where the Germans had been in occupation; where people suffered from the Gestapo and SS. It is not the case here. I attribute this attitude to the sense of fair play which the British soul enshrines.

'Let us honour all of those who tragically lost their lives during this cruel war. Let's hope that nothing similar ever happens again.'

At the graveside, 78-year-old Heinz Möllenbrok voiced similar sentiments when he appealed for the spirit of reconciliation to continue through future generations. For this

In one of the most thorough examinations of a wartime crash site ever undertaken in the UK, the work was carried out in two stages. Initially, heavy plant was used to excavate the clay removing large portions of wreckage (although when human remains were discovered these were carefully recovered by hand with small tools). Having dug the wreckage and tons of clay from the ground, it was carefully checked to ensure that all explosive ordnance was recovered. For this, an industrial soil grader hired from a local company was used. The spoil was transferred into a vibrating hopper at the top of the grader where the clay containing wreckage and ammunition was sprayed with water from high pressure hoses supplied by the Fire Service. (The excess water was drained into sumps before being pumped to a nearby filtration plant.) The clay fell through three sieves of reducing size, each feeding a separate conveyor belt, so that the graded clay could be cleared by hand by EOD operators. After being moved to a 'clean' area the clay was then finally checked before being declared clear of ordnance.

At first, it was assumed that the human remains were those of the missing crewman but the discovery of a battledress blouse with the insignia of a Feldwebel seemed to indicate that they were those of the pilot, Joachim Lehnis (who, of course, already had a grave). However, on closer examination, it was seen that a fourth eagle on the collar was missing, indicating an Oberfeldwebel. As this rank was only worn by the gunner, Heinrich Richter, an inquest ruled that there must have been a mix-up in 1942 and that the grave containing Richter's remains really was that of Hans Maneke. (S. McMillan)

writer, at least, that spirit was amply demonstrated by an elderly lady who came forward to place her own small bouquet of flowers after the official wreaths had been laid. It transpired that she had been a member of the Belgian Resistance when her country had been under German occupation during the last war. Her husband of two weeks had been shot by the Gestapo. In those dangerous days, she had not been able to place flowers on her husband's grave but, she said, she hoped that someone had done so on her behalf.

Local legend has it that some time after the cessation of hostilities in 1945, a German lady visited South Bank and sought the location of the crash site. It is said that she told people that her son had been one of the crew of the Dornier but that he had never been found. If the story is true, the lady must have been the mother of Hans Maneke, for by then what were believed to be the wireless operator's three colleagues had been given graves in Thornaby cemetery. Sadly, she could not have known that an error had been made; and if she visited Thornaby and stood by the graves of her son's friends, she would not have known that she was standing within six feet of her son.

There were no members of Heinrich Richter's family present when he was buried, and it seems that any trace of Frau Maneke was lost long ago, but they were represented on the day by a grey-haired old lady who had refuted justifiable reasons to feel bitter and whose spontaneous floral tribute made a far deeper impression on many of those present than did the impressive, and faultless, official arrangements.

Left: **Heinrich Richter was buried alongside his crew on October 14, 1998.** *Right:* **The previous day, a new headstone had been erected on his former grave to correctly identify it as being that of Hans Maneke. (S. McMillan)**